

Hito Hata Ageru

By: HARPG0

Jounouchi's latest duel doesn't end with the fame he was hoping for. Now, Kaiba's involved. The last two chapters are up!

Status: complete

Published: 2009-07-16

Updated: 2010-06-26

Words: 48731

Chapters: 13

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Hurt/Comfort/Adventure - Characters: K. Jounouchi/Joey W., S. Kaiba - Reviews: 142 - Favs: 140 - Follows: 65

Original source: <https://www.fanfiction.net/s/5222710/1/Hito-Hata-Ageru->

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Hito Hata Ageru

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

Chapter 1

Hito Hata Ageru

"I summon Flame Swordsman," Jounouchi Katsuya said as he held up the warrior/fusion card with the character's name, , written boldly upon it.

Along with the other monsters already in position, a warrior in full armor appeared on the field wielding his oversized blade and the onlookers in the battle arena mumbled in the background with approval.

"Sorry, pal, but I'm going to attack with it." He chuckled modestly with a hand behind his blond head as he spoke the words. He glanced around the Kaiba Land Advanced Dueling Arena-looking for the people he wanted with him to share this moment. To his delight, he saw Yuugi, Anzu, and Honda sitting on folding chairs at the ground floor base of the platform where other duelists, awaiting their turns, were milling around, chatting, and trading cards-trying not to pay attention to Jou, but couldn't help themselves otherwise. Then, Jou's gaze moved up. Something, a kind of instinct, just told him to do it. On high, leaning over the decorative iron balcony railing was Kaiba Seto in an ivory suit. His black laptop case was clinched in his right hand. With his blue eyes flashing dangerously, the CEO stormed away, exit stage right.

He looks kind of... mad. He must be going to a meeting were the thoughts that floated to Jou but quickly died away as he turned back to his opponent. It really was rude to make him wait.

The young man across from him, Jounouchi's opponent in this semi-final round, was Tanaka Yuuta-someone he'd never dueled before.

This guy must go to the same tailor as Kaiba, Jou decided, because the clothes seemed to be a knock-off copy of what the young CEO habitually wore—a long, white trench with a black shirt and dark trousers underneath. The lack of "KC" on the clothing wasn't missed at all by Jou, who didn't like having any advertising or designer logos on clothing anyway. Tanaka's features, he noted for the first time because he had calmed himself down enough to take a good look, really did resemble Kaiba with the exception of having lighter, almost mousy, brown hair and light, almost watery blue, eyes. They lacked the strength but not the determination... or was that *hatred* ?

Maybe, it's because he's gonna lose...?

The glare across from him darkened—which made it all the easier to lose sympathy. Bad losers had no place in Duel Monsters. Jerks took the fun out of the game.

Jounouchi smiled broadly. It felt good. Yes, he was going to win this round of the Kaiba Corp Charity Tournament. Not only his friends but other duelists and the people at home watching the action on TV would see. Best of all, everyone would have to acknowledge him as a serious duelist. He was skilled and deserved the right to stand by his friend Yugi's side.

In the next moment, it would be over. In his imagination, he could see the life points spinning down to zero.

Jou's armored monster raised his sword and was about to attack Tanaka's monster, Kaibaman, when a single shot rang out. And the crowd silenced, all eyes staring unbelievably before screaming broke out and people fled for the exits, pushing and shoving. The world was moving but Jou wasn't a part of it. But, he knew it, too. In that single, hideous moment, Jounouchi thought someone had hit him with a fastball. He found that he had to struggle to breathe and, suddenly, blood was seeping through his shirt—dripping down like red tears. A fine spray-splatter was all over the elaborate control panel and the cards, forever ruining them.

With effort, Jou lifted his head up to see Tanaka still standing on the dueling tower across from him holding a smoking handgun.

"Now, you'll never cause Kaiba-sama a problem ever again....third-rate duelist..."

He laughed.

Men in dark glasses tackled him against the control panel, having climbed up the thin emergency ladder leading to the top of the left dueling tower. But, there was no resistance. He continued to laugh just the same-the laugh of a devoted young fan who had done single-handedly what his merciful god had failed to accomplish.

A world too bright, too loud, and too colorful suddenly bled to black. Jounouchi collapsed against the control panel. Blood seeped into the controls, making the sophisticated machinery buzz and hum repeatedly.

The hand holding the deck opened, letting his precious cards escape.

Yugi, Honda, and Anzu, held back by three of Kaiba's security men in black sunglasses, shouted at them in a torrent of words as Kaiba Seto scaled the emergency ladder upwards onto the dueling tower and approached Jounouchi's side. The young CEO had a mobile phone stuck to his ear, clearly demanding something from the person on the other end. He flipped the phone closed, pocketed it, and took the bleeding duelist in his arms. Seto had to wipe the blood from the controls with the side of his hand in order to find the right button to push to reset the controls and move the twin dueling towers back to their pre-dueling position at the opposite ends of the field.

The tower complained in low vibrated tones before it lurched into motion.

Holding the blond close to his chest bridal style, Seto looked out upon the arena-the last of the shrieking crowds were running out,

Jou's opponent had been dealt with, the Domino City Police informed, and, turning his head downwards, he could see the absolute terror in Yugi's eyes.

Someone had to be strong in this situation. Seto chose himself.

The chestnut haired CEO could hear his phone ringing in his pocket. From the ringtone, a theme song from Mokuba's favorite TV show, he knew who it was. There was always voicemail and his brother would just have to use it this one time.

Hands cupped to her mouth, Anzu was shouting out something he chose not to listen to.

Seto could feel Jounouchi's struggled breathing and the warm blood seeping into his white suit. He'd have these clothes burned once this day was over with.

"Kaiba?" Jou whispered.

Shocked, Seto tilted his head downwards to see him, stepping onto the second story platform that opened out with glass doors leading to the multi-story carpark.

"I *hurt*... Kaiba... hurts..." He was shaking hard now and his face buried itself against the shoulder of a warm neck. "... Cold... never be warm again..." The blond swallowed thickly and Seto could feel the gentle motion against his skin.

"Stay with me," he ordered, expecting nothing less than total compliance by the blond.

Now, on the platform, the young man made large strides for the side exit with the burden in his arms, but not before giving a nod to his men-telling them that it was acceptable to have Yugi and his pals take the glass elevator up so that they could follow him.

Jounouchi moaned weakly before opening his honey eyes again. "I don't know why... you're doing this for me, but..." he breathed against what he had thought before this day was an enemy.

Suddenly, Seto glanced down in shock as he felt Jounouchi sag in his arms.

"You'll be fine," Kaiba could hear himself say as the ambulance that he had on stand by outside the glass doors next to the cub (just in case someone had fainted at the event) opened the double doors in back. The team rolled out a stretcher. Another one of Kaiba's men held the left door open, being of some help. The man, who was obviously half Japanese and half Korean, put two fingers to the piece in his right ear, monitoring the situation from his end through BlueTooth.

"His friends are almost here, Kaiba-sama," he reported followed by the unmistakable sound of running feet on the white tile floor.

"Just put him down here, sir," the EMT said, eyeing the patient with a professional air. Immediately, he turned and began a whole new conversation with the other EMTs, getting to work. The driver was set and ready to go.

Gently, Kaiba placed Jou onto the stretcher as Anzu put a hand to her right eye to brush back a tear. As much as she needed to see Jou, she also needed to keep a respectable distance and let the ambulance workers do their jobs. Yugi looked lost and Honda put his wide paw on his friend's shoulder, giving a comforting squeeze.

Seto motioned to his man by the ambulance door. "Give these two," he pointed at Anzu and Honda, "a ride to the hospital." He turned to the closest of the three EMTs while wiping the rest of the tacky blood on his side, "We will ride in the ambulance."

"I want to go with him," Yugi affirmed, eyes determined as though he were dueling.

Kaiba sighed openly. "I knew you would. That's what I meant by 'we.' So, let's go."

For Yugi, the ride was harrowing-sirens blaring, the ambulance easing through red lights and soaring around traffic. There were two people working on Jounouchi and all he could do was sit there and feel useless.

Once or twice, the spiky-haired duelist looked to Kaiba Seto and marveled at how, unblinking, he could watch it all-the blood pressure cuff pumping, the IV drips, the endless chatter that seemed like a foreign language-and not change his expression beyond something that appeared to be a mix of boiling anger and concern.

"Kaiba?" Yugi ventured, his spiky hair wilting.

Covered in dried blood that was not his own, the CEO looked to his rival, cold blue eyes cutting through him. "Don't ask. Don't say another word."

Because, even now, I'm only holding on.

Jou's face was turned towards him-eyes closed, skin bluish, lips parted. The blond seemed as though his body had crumpled into the stretcher.

"Jounouchi Katsuya-san," one EMT said in an annoying tone. He squeezed the duelist's hand. "I need you to wake up. I need you to talk to me. *Stay awake* ."

But Jou didn't.

Note: "Hito Hata Ageru" is a Japanese idiom that means "to make a name for one's self" or "to gain fame."

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

"I'll be sending you a ticket, then," Kaiba drawled over the phone as he picked up his hot canned coffee, "Georgia Coffee Platinum Blend," from the machine in the hallway. With an annoyed frown coming to him, he flipped his phone closed, pocketing it.

"Was that Jounouchi-kun's father?" Mokuba asked from his seat in the waiting area. If he lifted his head high enough, he could see past the decorative half-wall that looked out into the hallway and, further down, the nurse's station.

"Yes," the CEO said, entering the waiting area and taking a seat next to his younger brother. He eyed the group around him which included Honda, Yugi, and Anzu. "His father's a construction worker in Hokkaido. Technically, Asahikawa... And that's a problem if he's going to see his son."

"So, you're sending him an airline ticket to come?" Yugi said, looking impressed at Kaiba's generosity.

"Round trip," he shrugged into his drink, taking a deep sip.

"That's really good of you," Anzu said but found herself feeling a little awkward about it. She wanted to praise the CEO, too, but couldn't find words sincere enough. From looking at his face, it was clear that he was holding something back, something important he wasn't telling. And that, alone, made her nervous.

"The police want to talk to us," Mokuba said matter-of-factly. "But, I set our team of lawyers on them. Actually one was watching the tournament on TV and contacted me before I could dial his number."

"Which one?"

"Midorikawa."

"He's good," Seto remarked, taking another drink, "make sure to keep him on speed dial in case this gets ugly."

"Ugly? How," Honda asked, not wanting to be left out.

Kaiba gave him an even look. "Not that it matters to you, but with the way the audience rushed out, all it will take is a skinned knee and there will be a lawsuit behind it saying that the security should have been better, we should have wrestled this guy to the ground sooner, etc."

"Oh, I see..." Yugi sighed.

"Not to mention that there's the criminal investigation," Mokuba chimed in "and how long it's going to take to get Jounouchi-kun to testify... And who knows, after the surgery that he's having right now... I mean, they'll need him well enough to even talk about it all. Plus, he'll be in that bed for weeks and..."

"His father has no insurance on him." Kaiba took another hard swig after interrupting.

"No!" Mokuba breathed, astonished. "He's still seventeen and all. It's not like a minor usually takes medical insurance out on himself or anything. That's his father's responsibility."

"Well, he didn't," Kaiba frowned into his drink. "The man told me so on the phone after my secretary called all over Hokkaido trying to locate him. It was just a good thing that Mutt mentioned in passing to Mokuba that his father works for Obayashi Corp."

"Kaiba, he's not a 'mutt' or anything," Honda defended to which he got a careless shrug.

"So, how will he...?" Yugi asked.

"I'll pay for it," Kaiba grumped. "If our insurance doesn't cover it... which, I'm sure, it will because Kaiba Corp only has the best and it was during one of our sponsored tournaments... But, if not... I'll pay out of pocket."

"Really?!" Yugi said, looking relieved.

"But, I think he'd much prefer the insurance because he'd hate to owe us anything," Mokuba added, knowing how Jounouchi could be when it came to debts-whether his own or his father's.

Then, Yugi nodded. Yes, his friend was that proud and that stubborn. It would be just like him to refuse help and to work himself into the ground to pay for what had been done for him by the hospital.

"I'll send my driver to pick up his father from the airport tomorrow," Seto stated coldly as he got up from his seat and went to the window. The dusty blinds carried a soft haze. He turned back to Yugi. "Make sure, when the time comes, to explain to him that the ticket was necessary to get his father here."

"A gift from me," Mokuba said to Yugi. With a smile, he leaned back saying, "So much for my allowance this week."

That got a huffed laugh from the CEO. Mokuba's cash allowance was nothing compared to his Platinum Card.

Feeling only slightly better, Seto got back down in the seat and folded his arms against his chest. What he'd failed to mention was that Jounouchi's father seemed only mildly upset that his son had been shot in full view of everyone. The man had no interest in "that card game," as he jokingly called it and seemed somewhat reluctant to see his own child in the hospital because of the expense in coming down and the loss of pay from not working. But the elder Jounouchi-san made it very clear that his ex-wife, Jou's mother, was not to be contacted. The divorce was very specific-he got "the son" and his ex got "the daughter." That was it.

Seto drained the last drop from the can as his memory flashed to the words "He's always been like that... getting himself into trouble. First, that gang... and, now... this. Not that I've always been around. A man's gotta work, ya know... But, I'm sure he'll be okay."

Some part, and an angry part at that, wanted to throw the can at the wall in frustration.

Does this man not understand that Jounouchi could die? And, if not from the surgery going on now... then, from the complications afterwards?

Seto shook his head at that.

"Thanks for coming and staying this long," Yugi said with a thin smile. "I know that you're here because it was your tournament and all but..."

Seto eyed him sharply. It sounded like he was being dismissed out of hand which made him want to stay even more. At least, he thought it did. "And your point is...?"

"Well, I'm sure... it's been a long day for you," Anzu added to Yugi's words. "We can take it from here."

Seto raised an eyebrow at her. And, then, the thought occurred *Why did I stay this long?*

Truth be told, he didn't know himself.

"And, you're still kind of... bloody," Anzu went on with a finger pointed to the splatters on Kaiba's shirt. He'd taken the coat off when they first arrived at the hospital, but the Italian designed light blue dress shirt and tie were blotched in small dried stains and smudges.

"Ugh, yeah..." Mokuba observed. "She's right, Nii-sama. We'd better go." He stood up. And, at that point, it was useless for Kaiba to argue. But, some nagging and irrational part of him did. Some part

wanted to stay behind because it *needed* to. But Kaiba mentally fisted that part of himself, crushed it, and tossed the remains into the darkness. There was no need of it as he walked down the hallway after his younger brother.

"Sometimes, Kaiba can do nice things," Anzu observed, "it's just... a kind of 'nice' in his own way."

"Well, I don't buy that," Honda griped and Yugi smiled briefly for the first time in four hours. "Not one bit."

Kaiba Seto was out of the hot shower and into a pair of blue silk pajamas. He patted his hair dry, heading for the bed—a large, black leather sleigh bed that dominated the center of the room. An elaborate painting of a Blue-eyes White Dragon hung behind the headboard.

Kaiba reached over to the night stand and picked up the remote—popping the flat screen to life directly across from him.

"And, in the news tonight, duelist Katsuya Jounouchi was..."

click

"A shooting at a charity tournament sent spectators fleeing for the doors..."

click

"Today, a Kaiba Corp tournament to benefit..."

click

"Just in, this dramatic footage taken from a fan's camera phone shows CEO Kaiba Seto rescuing duelist Jounouchi Katsuya, a student at Domino High, from..." Slowly, the voice faded away as Seto leaned forward, lips parted slightly.

There were two figures on the dueling tower as it moved along its tracks. Seto saw himself holding a bloodied Jou in his arms-a protective stance threatening any and all who stood in his way. Briefly, he whispered something to him. Jou had one pale hand, washed in water-color red, on his shoulder. Seto tried to remember the touch, but he couldn't.

Still...

The face peering up looked so inconsolable.

In such pain...

His. Theirs.

No! Seto shook his head and kicked the thought out that was looming. It was just too maudlin for words. He couldn't accept it, *wouldn't*. Instead, Seto balled up the towel and threw it into the adjoining master bath, making a wet "smack" onto the imported tile floor.

He'd had enough for one day. He was going to sleep.

Wearing a white yukata with gold dragonflies embroidered on it, Jounouchi Katsuya found himself sitting in the middle of a simple redwood bridge, feet dipping into the water as cherry blossoms floated and petals spiraled down on him from an overhanging branch. Looking vaguely to the right, he could see a lush pine forest and a sandy path leading to the bridge. To the left, he could see land shrouded in a pearly mist-deep green colors fading away. If he peered hard enough, though, he could make out small balls of bright light dancing. There were joyful voices and the faint notes from a flute-making the place where he was sitting somewhat lonely.

His heart sank.

Maybe, there's a festival, he thought to himself before turning back to the water under his feet. Koi fish swam there, just below his toes, playing hide-n-seek with him.

If he stayed in this place long enough, Jou knew he would have to make a decision.

Should he go left or right?

Jou stared at the water and remembered school, friends, childhood memories, his parents back in the early days when life was simpler and his father bothered to come home... and... *Something* . There was a flash of memory. It was Kaiba again, leaning over the railing at the tournament. He'd seemed so angry... or was it...

Worry? The word floated to him.

He didn't know.

There were footfalls along the sandy path.

Another figure appeared on the forest side-tall, thin, and in shadows. But, without even making out the face at all, Jou knew who it was. Why Kaiba Seto was here, he couldn't even begin to piece together. But, it was okay, too. Being together was fine, natural.

It *was* him. And, it *wasn't* him.

"So, what are you planning to do?" he asked evenly, approaching the bridge with his hands clasped behind his back. Kaiba regarded the white robed person in front of him for a minute. He, in contrast, was wearing a jet black yukata of the darkest night. There was no other color or any adornment on him.

"Why am I here now...?" the blond asked, tilting his face up to the figure.

"You didn't answer my question. And I won't repeat myself." He stepped out of his geta and took a seat next to the blond. Kaiba's

long legs had no problem stretching down. His feet plunged into the water well past his ankles.

"I can't decide," Jounouchi admitted. Then, he motioned to the left. "It's really cool and pleasant over there. And I'd like to join the festival. I can hear them. They're having a great time." Then, he looked past Kaiba to the green forest where he'd come. "But, you're from that side, huh?"

Kaiba nodded. "For now." And, with a vague smile, he dusted some of the cherry petals from Jou's hair.

"And if I join the festival, you can't come with me. None of my friends can." Jou's eyes grew sad at the prospect. He hated being alone. And he hated making the choice. But, for some reason, it was being offered.

A brown eyebrow raised at him. "Do you count me as a friend?"

Jounouchi shrugged. He knew that his other "self," his ordinary "self," would have backed away from the question. It hit too close to the mark and could lead to other things. But, the bridge he was on made him honest and made him understand that embarrassment came from pride. And *pride* could never follow him to this place.

"I think the way we started... the day I first met you and asked you to play Duel Monsters with me and you said..."

Kaiba shook his head. "It was wrong of me to be like that with you. But pushing people away is my nature in this life. You know that by now."

Jounouchi put his palms flat on the bridge and leaned back-head tilted up to the overcast sky above. It was a beautiful, intoxicating grey.

"Yes..." he sighed. "I do that too, I just use different words."

He took in a long, slow breath of damp air. It felt good to be feeling the slight moistness caressing his skin. "We have a bond... don't we, Kaiba?"

"We do."

Jounouchi closed his honey colored eyes. "That's why, no matter how much I want this... to go left... I can't do it. That's why I stopped here."

Almost contemplative, Kaiba leaned forward with his forearms resting on his thighs. "You could go now, and wait for me on the other side." His head turned to the bright lights from the festival growing nearer and clearer. Cheerful voices were calling to Jou, coming this way.

"We would be together again... someday," Kaiba suggested quietly.

Jou sat up and regarded his companion. "But, I would have regrets and I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself without..."

Kaiba smiled thinly. "You would forget me the moment you stepped off of the bridge." He turned slightly to the blond and placed a hand on his shoulder, bringing them closer. "But you would come for me... to this place... when my soul called out for you again. You would hear me."

"I probably would," he said, tilting his head to one side, "but the question is... *why*?"

Kaiba raised his left hand and, in turn, Jounouchi couldn't help but raise his right. It was as though they were playing a game of Cat's Cradle together-a red string laced and zigzagged through Kiba's fingers only to be laced again the same way through Jounouchi's.

"Because, we have always been together. You just don't remember it."

Honey eyes met with deep blue ones.

It was true. He knew it now. It had always been... *true* .

The fights, the insults, the arguments... The places in the world that he'd traveled to and the times he had to face terrifying odds... He'd never been alone, really. Kaiba had always been there... somewhere. It was just the surname, he realized now, that had thrown him off. "Kaiba" was not Seto's birth name. He never spoke the true name and so Jounouchi never knew the soul-comfort he would have gotten from hearing it. And, from changing his name, Seto had changed his fate as well.

"Then..." He clutched his chest, suddenly bending forward as his stubby nails clawed into the white yukata. " *Then... I...* " Jou gritted out, eyes scrunched shut. Kaiba placed a hand on his back, supporting him.

There was a flash of bright light.

Hurtful.

"I want to stay..." He leaned his head heavily on Kaiba's shoulder, fighting for breath. "... To stay in this lifetime..."

He wanted to scream this time, it hurt so bad.

"... With you..."

Jounouchi Katsuya's body arched as the paddles distributed another electrical charge, restarting his heart. The heart monitor beeped back into life as the blond's body fell against the mattress.

He was home again.

The clock on Seto's nightstand glowed an unpleasant 5:12 AM in bright blue. But it didn't matter. He hadn't been able to get much

sleep as the events from the night before kept playing over and over in his mind. Worse yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that he should be somewhere else right now.

It was stupid. Illogical. But, there it was.

A fist found its way into the pillow a few times before chestnut hair splayed across it. "I failed." Why he hadn't even conceived of this possibility was beyond comprehension. Of course, there were psychos out there who would mess things up. But still, he should have planned for all eventualities. " *All*," he growled to himself.

But, it *had* happened. It had. And, even now, staring at the ceiling, he could see it all again.

"Nii-sama? Hello?" Mokuba said into his cell phone from the computer control room in the back of the Kaiba Land Advanced Dueling Arena. "It's me, Mokuba." With some relief in his voice, his young brother said, "We have an issue."

"And that would be?" Seto asked while stepping into his black limo from the airport. He hated that he hadn't been able to make it there for the start of the tournament. But, business was business and he just couldn't get out of the meeting. Some matters required personal, face to face, communication to prove the deal was serious.

"We have a little problem with a participant named..." Sitting at a terminal, Mokuba scrolled down to review the data again. A picture of the man in question glared up at him from the screen. "Tanaka Yuuta."

With an annoyed sigh, Kaiba opened his laptop as the limo began to roll forward with an easy pace. He placed the computer in his lap and pushed the "on" button-waiting for the icons to make an appearance.

"Apparently, he's 'invited himself' to this tournament," Mokuba said in his ear. "And, not surprisingly, he didn't do anything to make himself

qualified to even be here."

"Like this hasn't happened before..." Kaiba drawled as he surfed his way into the charity tournament's logon page.

"But, Nii-sama... He's gotten himself listed as a semi-finalist out of nowhere. People, besides Mazaki Anzu, are going to say something because it's so... so *obvious*. And, more to the point, we've been hacked! How did he manage that without every bell and whistle around here going off?"

"Eh? What did you say?"

Mokuba chuckled at his end. Finally, he was getting through to his brother. The sheer arrogance of this stranger and the scandal of it all was...

"Someone got more than just a 'friendship speech' out of that twit?" Kaiba quirked a grin as he clicked through screens.

Mokuba set his jaw. "Well, if she noticed and brought it to my attention, others will, too... and..."

Seto shrugged as the limo neared the arena. "I fail to see the issue. He'll just lose to... whoever..." He began shutting down his computer. What a waste of battery life it was to check into the matter in the first place. He'd just join Mokuba the second he got there and hand Tanaka over, should he be stupid enough to linger around, to the police. And, of course, there would be charges.

"Nii-sama," his brother's tone took an edge that Seto didn't care for. He frowned. "Nii-sama, it looks like Tanaka purposefully set himself up as an opponent to duel against..."

"Jounouchi." Kaiba finished for him, forcing his voice to sound disinterested. He'd already scanned that part when he got to the web site.

"Yes! And it's really weird, too."

The limo pulled to a smooth stop and the tall figure got out of the back, not waiting for his driver to open the door.

Weird? Well... yes, it is... Though, I'd never want to worry you by saying so.

His steps faltered for a moment with a hard, premature heartbeat. Seto gripped the handle to his laptop case. There it was-a feeling.

Seto walked on with longer strides and a more purposeful gate. Now, it was more than Mokuba's nagging. There was something else-something inside of him that was harassing him, pulling him along. He had to make it.

He took the eastern, VIP Entrance-a frown etching into him as the automatic doors opened.

"More to the point," Mokuba went on, "this guy shouldn't have been able to hack into a system as sophisticated as ours. It'd be like a caveman using a scalpel. From what I can see, he attends Meijo University with a major in business... idolizes you, according to his personal web site... and had elective surgery to..." His voice trailed off for a second, as though he needed a moment to digest what he'd learned. "Umm... to *appear*... more like you."

"Whoa, catch the 'after' photo. He really does look more like Kaiba-sama, huh?" said a deep voice in the background. "Now, he seems close enough to be a brother." There was a dope-slap sound with Mokuba's faint voice seething, "They're not exactly twins. And *I'm* the only brother he's got and it's going to stay that way!"

Then, Mokuba returned. "Uh, sorry about that, Nii-sama... technical difficulties." Then, he clicked a keyboard. "Tanaka's got a ton of links going back to Kaiba Corp, scandal mags, and fangirl sites."

Kaiba groaned inwardly. "So, he's a drooling fan. Just what I *don't need*," Seto said acidly.

"Yeah, but," and, then, the sound of keys tapping in the background came over the phone, "I don't have any record of him entering the building, either. It's just like 'POOF!' he appeared." More keys tapped. "I had him on camera, though, about fifteen minutes ago. He likes to pace before a duel... just like you do." A slight chuckle. "He's also wearing today a knock-off Kaiba Corp trench jacket that's probably homemade."

Seto walked on. There was a balcony ahead.

Mokuba hummed in satisfaction until "Oh, Hell!"

Seto's eyes narrowed. "Language, Mokuba. I don't care how old you are, *watch it* ."

"Oh, I mean... um... Yeah... but..." There was a panicked edge in Mokuba's voice now. It was so unlike him, no matter the circumstance.

"But, what?" His brother's tone spoke of impatience.

"According to Tanaka's own blog site... that he updated today... Jounouchi Katsuya is a 'total loser' and a problem to be dealt with... and..."

"And... what?" Seto's footsteps hastened. He was almost running.

" *Buried* ."

Seto's feet banged against the floor as he approached the balcony. "When does he duel Jounouchi?" he demanded, heart thumping in his chest.

"Now! It's going on now, Nii-sama! I've got it on camera."

"I've got it all under control," Seto said roughly. "Call you back."

The phone flipped closed.

Seto slowed down, gathering his wits, as he approached the railing. He knew that there were people all around him. More to the point, there were cameras and live video feed going directly to the Internet. The CEO had no evidence, only a compelling feeling. In business, that would usually be enough. But, today.

There was a soft and steady roar echoing from the crowd. In unison, the eyes of the arena turned to him. Small pops of light flashed like thousands of stars coming to life and then dying all around him.

Then, from below, as the audience's roar grew, a blond mop of hair fell back as a handsome face tilted up to him. The eyes were honey-colored and the expression was indefinable, but, clearly, caught in the moment. Still, their gaze met and there was a connection.

Nothing else existed: Not the stage, not the towers, not the glittering scoreboard or the lifepoints shimmering in deep red.

Just Jou.

Just honey-colored eyes.

Seto forced himself to look at Tanaka's profile. His gaze burned at Jounouchi-a barely controlled rage mixed with jealousy that had nothing to do with dueling. And, in an instant, Kaiba Seto recognized it-the look of a devotee who could sense a bond between the one he worshipped and the man opposite on the stage-an undeserved union with his idol; one that he could never even hope to have, for even he was unworthy.

But a bond, nonetheless.

An intimate connection...

One that he chose to sever.

With anger fading to pride, Tanaka, too, lifted his chin at his god-CEO, Kaiba Seto-standing on high in judgment of their duel like a pharaoh. And Tanaka would carry out the dirty work, something far too lowly to have been dealt with, personally, by such a beautiful creature. It was something only a worshipper could do and had planned to do all along.

They locked eyes-faded blue to hard cerulean. "Buried," Seto whispered as it came to him and he rushed out. The glass elevator would be too slow. He'd take the stairs. If he ran fast enough, he just might make it.

The CEO opened his phone again and held down the number 4 button. On the other end, one of his security people answered. "I think we have a situation here. Go to the dueling tower and deal with Tanaka. I'll take care of Jounouchi Katsuya personally."

Still on his way, he flipped the phone closed. A surprised man in black saw Seto pass only to get a laptop case shoved into his chest. With an "oof" he grabbed on but buckled over somewhat, breath knocked out of him.

Seto continued.

He'd seen Tanaka's eyes. He'd seen them.

Death was written there.

"Damn it," he gritted out with clinched fists, arms pumping as he went.

Seto took the stairs and kept on going. The final step was coming and he'd already mapped out in his mind the next part when...

BANG.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3

The limo pulled up in front of the hospital at the same time as a car from behind, a shiny red Lotus, did the same. The limo driver, a medium height Japanese man in formal suit and white gloves, opened the door for Jounouchi Katashi-san. The senior Jounouchi was a man in his mid 50's, blond shoulder-length hair that was graying at the temples and two long pieces draped over the ears only to be tied in the back in a stubby ponytail. He had leathery skin from working construction jobs and sharp, blackish-brown eyes. The tall, wiry-framed man exited the limo carrying a small, black duffle bag with his few possessions inside of it. Katashi liked traveling light. He'd always been that way.

Seto threw him a sour look. Unmistakably, the man was the blond mutt's father. The face and every gesture reflected it. But, it was a harsh version of the Jounouchi Katsuya that everybody knew. And, for some reason, it unsettled Seto.

The car made a merry "chirp" and the Lotus' doors locked. Walking away from his car, Seto raised a curious eyebrow as he approached the stranger. There was definitely something *off* about him; something he couldn't quite put into words just yet. But from all of his years trapped in business meetings and from dealings with quasi-honest people, the man's aura made him more than ponder.

Then again... Maybe, it's due to concern for his only son. "Maybe," Seto murmured out loud.

"I'm Kaiba Seto. We spoke on the phone earlier," the young CEO said in a forced tone that came across as politely bored, extending his hand and not being entirely sure why he wanted to. Politeness

wasn't necessary in this situation. But, his hand simply went forward before he thought the better of it.

Cameras flashed and three reporters with camera crews appeared out of nowhere for ambush interviews. Groaning inwardly, Seto turned and could see one young female reporter practically drooling with microphone in hand.

A frown appeared between his eyes as he clasped Jounouchi-san's hand. Two more reporters appeared from behind parked vans across the street, talking to themselves on camera. The paparazzi, not to be outdone, were becoming more aggressive by the second-trying to push their way to the front as they crossed the street.

They were slowing down traffic and cars honked with annoyance.

Seto gave a simple nod to the limo driver who, in turn, was on his mobile phone in a flash. Eight of the young CEO's men in black poured through the front doors of the hospital and positioned themselves. They blocked the way, making a wall with their bodies. The Domino City Police Department was on speed dial should it become necessary. The hospital security joined in, too, looking much less intimidating in their blue uniforms. But the reporters were more than used to Seto's tactics by now. And they backed off reluctantly, still more than pleased with the footage they managed to get-that of the great Kaiba Seto-sama, rescuer, shaking hands with the man they presumed to be the fallen duelist's parent.

"I'm Katsuya's father," the elder Jounouchi stated with a searching look at the press and, then, Kaiba as they released hands. There was something about the teen that felt almost familiar. True, he'd had a vague memory of seeing him on TV and in the newspapers. *It's probably the fact he's the same age as my kid. And it couldn't hurt to have connections with someone this wealthy.* Katashi-san quirked a grin. Maybe, his luck was improving. "Let's go see my boy," he suggested as he turned and then added, "But I'm also having a nic fit and I need a smoke ya know? I'll keep this brief."

Seto tilted his head incredulously to one side. Did he just hear that?

"And you're putting me up in a hotel near here, right?" the man continued without turning.

Annoyance creeping in, Seto caught up with his steps, now walking side by side. "Over there," he thumbed at a hotel, The Domino Inn, that loomed three blocks to their left. Walking distance. The exterior was that of a faux-tutor design, three stars, and a sizable number of the guests were staying there because of friends or relatives in the hospital.

"That's great."

Seto flashed the senior Jounouchi a filthy look. He wasn't here on business or pleasure-neither one of them were. They were here because Jounouchi had been shot at a tournament. And Seto, no matter what he did, couldn't forget the stench of blood or the desperate, pained look in Jounouchi's honey-colored eyes as he held him.

Damn.

Absently, Seto ran his fingers down one sleeve to remind himself that he wasn't wearing the suit and tie as he did on that day. Today, Seto was wearing a long sleeved black shirt, black designer jeans and a dark blue coat that hugged his chest nicely. Dark. Dark was good. Nothing that could be stained red. In fact, he might have the maids donate everything that he owned that was red to charity.

The elevator doors opened silently, revealing a hallway that was bright from fluorescent lights embedded into the drop ceiling.

Because he'd been to this hospital before as a charity donor, the young CEO knew his way around only too well and naturally took charge-leading the way with, he assumed, Jounouchi's father falling in step behind him.

Nurses, busy with their tasks and patient files, passed them in the hallway but looked back with keen interest.

Seto, face set, ignored them. He could hear their footsteps on the white linoleum floor, now, as they passed the nurses' station. And, with confidence, he pushed the door open to room 215.

That was where Yugi said he'd be.

And that was where *he* was.

The elder Jounouchi went in after him and Kaiba Seto lingered to the side to close the door behind them. Patients and nurses in the hallway seemed to be peeking in-which was annoying. Above all, Seto appreciated privacy. He'd post more of his men around the door later on. Nobody should be gawking at Jounouchi when he was in no position to physically or verbally defend himself.

Nobody. Seto narrowed his eyes.

"Oi, there..." the man's voice said out loud, shaking him from his thoughts.

Seto found himself standing before the foot of Jounouchi's bed while the absentee father approached the bedside awkwardly, one hand thrust into the right pocket of his faded jeans. The man dropped his bag unceremoniously in an empty chair next to Yugi, who almost jumped at it, waking up from the drowsy state he'd fallen into from being by Jounouchi's side for so long.

"K-Kaiba-san...?" Yugi breathed, coming back to himself. His gaze naturally went to the older man in the room. "Jounouchi-kun's... father." The tri-color hair wilted a little bit with the realization of who the stranger was. Nonetheless, he managed to force a smile on his face. "It's good to see you again, sir."

"Been awhile," Katashi-san said, extending a hand and giving a hard, knuckle-breaking shake before backing away and looking at

his son with a frown. "He sure looks like hell, huh?" He stared at the teen with a distant look in his eyes. "But, I guess, I shouldn't be all that surprised considering what happened."

Yugi gave an incredulous stare to Jou's father and then shrugged at Kaiba. *Maybe, the spiky haired teen thought, this is just Jounouchi-san's way of dealing with things. Really, though, it has to be... to see his son like this...* Then, his eyes flicked back to Kaiba. The young CEO gave another glare in the direction of Jou's father. Clearly, he didn't like the man and was about to open his mouth to say so when Jou moaned.

Jounouchi was on drugs. The painkillers made his pupils seem unnaturally wide, mouth slack under a clear plastic mask strapped to his face, and body limp in the bed while an IV dripped into his arm and the monitors attached to him beeped lowly and with a melodious rhythm.

The lithe body moved weakly in the bed and the white sheets rustled.

Yugi looked to Jou's father who hadn't shifted from his spot. He waited a beat until he realized that the man wasn't going to move, wasn't going to do anything to give comfort. Yugi, instead, leaned forward and spoke kindly. "Jounouchi-kun?"

The head moved at the sound of the name. Jou seemed to be staring, trying to focus.

"It's me, Yugi."

Jounouchi gave him a blank stare followed by a slow blink.

"And... your father's here, too," he said almost nervously with a small gesture to the side and Jou's father leaned in a little more with a short wave.

"Hi, kiddo." The man gave a cheesy smile which, upon Kaiba's close inspection, seemed totally unnatural to his face. Now, Kaiba was certain that he couldn't stand him. And, if he'd been an employee, Seto would have put the man in a dead-end job out in some God-awful part of Kaiba Corp America, like Nebraska, where nothing happened. Just *firing* would be too good for him.

There was a slow, determined shake of the head "no." Jounouchi looked at his father with distrust clouding his features. Kaiba had seen that expression before-at school, during tournaments, when trying to size-up a situation, when facing bullies (himself included).

"Well, it's good to see ya made it out okay."

Jounouchi's eyes frowned. And, as naïve as he usually was, even Yugi could see it all too plainly. Worrying for his friend, Yugi grabbed Jou's hand and gave it a soft squeeze, hoping he'd get the blond to focus on him instead.

It didn't work.

Jou just stared at his father with a hard edge coming to him.

Yugi threw a pleading look to Seto. The young CEO sighed openly-asking himself again why he was here and not at work.

Then, the chestnut-haired young man turned to Jou again. Hard, distrusting eyes that seemed so determined made him come to a decision.

Seto ran his fingers through his hair and flipped his bangs back. "I think he seems a bit tired and you..." he went on in Jounouchi-san's direction "... said you're having a 'nic fit.' So, we'll stay with him while you take a break."

The older man grinned at that and patted his chest pocket where he kept his smokes. "I'll be right out front-smoking with the nurses on break." He gave a wink.

Seto nodded. "And, then, my driver will take you to your hotel to get checked in."

Jounouchi-san gave him an even wider smile as he took his black bag and made his way to the door. "See ya."

Seto didn't spare him a glance. In fact, he didn't do more than turn his back to the door and, at the same time, he tried to avoid Yugi's "What are we gonna do now?" incredulous expression.

Jou moaned in the bed again, shifting uncomfortably.

"The medicine must be wearing off." Yugi worried his lower lip between his teeth. He hated seeing his friend in that kind of state. But, with the surgery and all of the medical complications that had taken place afterwards-even now, it was all like a jumbled nightmare and he had no real sleep to speak of-nothing made sense anymore.

Jounouchi's head turned to a plastic water pitcher. He blinked at it.

"Do you want some water?" Yugi asked hopefully. "I could get some for you."

Seto shifted on his feet a little, noting the fact that Yugi seemed barely awake and not thinking clearly. "You might want to ask the nurses if it's okay for him to have water right now."

Yugi's eyes widened as he turned to Seto. "Oh, you're right. I really should get permission first." He picked up the empty plastic pitcher and stood from the chair. "Watch him while I'm gone?" Then, he felt bad for asking. It sounded like an order. He didn't really mean for it to. It just came out of his mouth that way. And the Kaiba Seto he knew was not one for being patient or accepting orders. *Then again...* He gave a sidelong glance at Seto. *He has changed a little since the incident.*

"I'll wait... for a *few moments*..." Seto emphasized the last two words. Yes, he'd wait-even though it was an inconvenience. At least,

that's what he told himself it was.

With a tired hand to his head, Yugi left the room. The door closed softly behind him.

In the hallway, Seto could make out the pointy-haired duelist's voice. "Ummm.... Excuse me, nurse... Is it okay if I...?" Footsteps on bare floor walked away.

Seto shook his head, disapproving. "Just listen to him... He's that weak all the time? Honestly... Yugi'd never make it in the business world." Seto turned back from the closed door to see a pair of honey-colored eyes staring at him.

They bored into him. Seeing, yet, unseeing.

The chestnut-haired young man frowned at that, feeling awkward. "Truth is... staying's not that big of a deal." And, it wasn't. He'd cleared his whole day for a reason he couldn't yet grasp. The reality was that he couldn't think well anyway. He told himself that it was some sort of shock he was suffering from after witnessing the shooting and taking its bleeding victim to safety.

That was all. Nothing more.

And honey eyes.

Seto leaned in closer. He just had to.

Jou's eyes softened. It was as though he finally pieced-together who was with him and it brought the greatest joy he could have possibly felt. Weakly, Jou reached out a shaking hand to Kaiba-palm raised.

"Stay..."

"What?"

The smiling eyes remained. "... With you... this life."

Seto cocked his head to the side, not totally understanding the meaning. He leaned forward. "What did you say?"

"Thank you," Jou whispered contentedly-his eye lids sliding shut. Through the mask, his features were calm, serene. It gave the illusion that Jounouchi had found peace and was pain-free.

Seto's hand moved on its own-contracted, squeezed and, then, laced.

He looked down.

He was holding Jounouchi's hand.

"When did that happen?"

"You have got to be the biggest fool there is." The voice was cruel and the owner of it gave the prisoner a hard jab to the back with a ballpoint pen.

"Ouch! Stop it," Tanaka Yuuta hissed over his shoulder. He'd just been processed: fingerprinted, photographed, and had a full body cavity search. He *was not* in a good mood at the moment.

"We gave you that gun to 'clean up' *after* the tournament was over." The voice was low but persistent. "What possessed you to deviate from the plan?" The lips drew nearer to Tanaka's ear as he hobbled down the hall, torso and legs still aching from the beating he took when Kaiba's men subdued him. They said he'd resisted and that there was video of it all. *Big deal!*

Of course, the police weren't exactly gentle, either.

"I did what had to be done." In his heart, he knew it to be the truth. If he'd gotten Jounouchi Katsuya after the event was over with, there would be the possibility that Kaiba Seto would not have been able to look on this with favor. The instant praise and glorification would

never have happened. And, yes, Tanaka knew he'd get caught this way. But it was a small price to pay for his god's attention and approval. *Besides, what's the point of being a martyr if no one knows you're a martyr?*

"Well, pretty boy, you're going to get a second chance." The persistent male voice said in his ear. "We're going to help you out... *again* ."

Takana and his guard passed a connecting hallway. At the far end, members of the press corp were there with cameras-video rolled and pops of light blinded them for a second, creating little grey dots in their vision when it did return.

A lone guard held them back for a second, blocking their path.

Tanaka could feel a hand on his shoulder, guiding him forward until they were alone again.

"A chance?" he hissed. "What are you talking about?"

"You heard me."

"Humph! You're outta your mind," the prisoner said using the rude "you" in Japanese and felt another sharp jab to his back again. "Damn it! That's enough!" Tanaka growled, head turning to the side as he said it.

"Just be ready," the guard ordered, shoving the prisoner through a door that another guard had just opened for them. "And do what you're told," he went on in a louder admonition.

Tanaka stumbled forward, caught his balance, and glared with a turn.

But the bullying guard was gone and the door shut with reinforced glass in place. A different guard stood in front of it with a scowl.

"That man's an idiot," the prisoner muttered to himself.

There was so much blood.

He cringed at the smell filling his nostrils. Kaiba Seto didn't need to look down to know what it was-warm and thick running rough his fingers as he clutched onto the fallen duelist in his arms.

The chestnut-haired CEO could feel the weight of the body and the motions-writhing against him with each jarring step that they took together.

"Kaiba?" Jou whispered, his head tilted up weakly.

They were now stepping onto the second story platform that opened out with glass doors leading to the multi-story carpark.

"I *hurt*... Kaiba... hurts..."

Jou was shaking hard now and his face buried itself against the shallow of a warm neck. The blood splatters and smudges on his face brushed against Seto's skin, marking him with the scent as well.

The voice was weak-begging for him, needing him. "... *Cold*... never be warm again..."

Something slowed down his pace, something he couldn't see. *Why?*

Seto took larger steps as the way to the ambulance took longer and longer to reach. It stretched thinly. It became impossibly long and darkness fell across them both when someone, inexplicably, shut off the lights.

The buzzing of the halogen lights stopped, creating an eerie quiet as the colors faded.

Seto paused for only a second, sizing up the situation. He forced his eyes to see what little he could. But, even the dim light was being swallowed up.

Jounouchi groaned against his neck with the next jarring step. "You'll be fine," he heard himself promise.

The blond swallowed thickly and Seto could feel the gentle motion against his skin along with a trail of warm, salty tears.

"I don't know why you're doing this for me..."

They were tangled together with a glowing red thread. It slowed him down and bound them tightly-arms, waist, thighs.

"Kaiba?"

"Shut up. Save your strength."

"But... why care... now?"

Seto opened his mouth and closed it again. He couldn't say it. The words wouldn't form, couldn't be uttered.

Forbidden.

He could feel Jounouchi's breathing becoming labored.

No!

Seto wanted to run, but the body cradled in his arms wouldn't be able to take it. He'd just bleed out.

"K-Kai..." And, then, a gasp of agony as the blond's body stiffened in pain.

"Make it stop, Kaiba," Jou pleaded against him. He was shaking hard, wet with blood, and almost impossible to grip onto. Seto's fingers ached with the tension.

The breathing turned into sobs. "... Whatever it takes... make the pain *stop*..." Jounouchi cried against him this time.

The floor was slick with his blood and Seto almost fell.

"Stay with me," he ordered, expecting nothing less than total compliance from the blond.

It was almost pitch black but he could make out the doors now. He'd done it! With sheer willpower and determination, he'd managed the impossible. And, once the mutt was better, he'd give him holy hell for the trouble and a cleaning bill for his suit. Seto could almost imagine the furious indignation at being forced to pay for the stain removal. Maybe, they'd argue... again. He loved it when they argued... the fire, the passion in honey colored eyes.

Their bond.

At least, that's what he thought it was in that moment until the glowing thread constricted. It hurt them both, and walking briskly did absolutely nothing to relieve the binding discomfort.

The thread became impossibly tight, making his body grow numb. Seto's first thoughts were of Jounouchi. Under the circumstances, how could he withstand this?

"K-Kaiba...?"

Seto almost slipped again. "Yeah, what?" he said with irritation.

The string tightened again and, in response, blond wrapped his arms around Seto's neck and whispered in his ear, "Forgive me."

A slender hand reached up, touching his cheek silkily. It drew a cold, shimmering path.

Seto could feel himself narrow his eyes in irritation as he glanced at the body in his arms that was nothing but a dark shadow among shadows. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Saying... *goodbye* ."

"Wha-?"

"I'm trouble for you. Someday, I hope, you'll... forgive..."

"Wait! You can't... !"

"... Tried your best... ya know..." There was a smile in his weak voice.

He shook his chestnut head, not wanting to hear. "Jounouchi... *stop it !*"

"I could never hate you, though. Remember that when you remember me."

The head drooped onto his shoulder first. Seto stopped abruptly when the body suddenly slumped in his arms and bled no more.

"Jounouchi?"

No! It was dark, but what little light allowed him to see it. They were standing before the glass doors and the doors were opening for them. Help was here!

"Jounouchi?" His voice was small, disbelieving, like a child's. "How could you?"

The red thread broke and fluttered to the floor.

From end to end, the color bled to black, merging with the darkness.

"J-Jou... nouchi?" He held the sad ragdoll body to his chest, hugging it. It was all he had left. "Don't do this..."

I'm alone again.

"Jou..."

"JOUNOUCHI!"

Hard breaths.

Hard breaths.

His own. The harsh sound in his ears.

Can't breathe hard enough!

Eyes wild, Seto bolted upright in the bed-arm stretched out as though grabbing something just beyond his reach.

"J-O-U!" he called desperately before he realized. Then, he buried his face in his hands.

It was two in the morning.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4

The nightmares continued like that for the next week. Adding mortification to the mix, Mokuba had rushed into his room twice-waking Seto each time almost instantly as the bedroom door slammed open and into the wall.

He'd never had nightmares like that, even when his mother died. Or, at least, he didn't think so. He'd have recalled something, young as he was back then.

The "Jounouchi" nightmares, as he referred to them in his head repeatedly in Kaiba Corp business meetings, stayed with him. Each horrible, graphic detail lingered. And, for the first time in his life, he felt almost *haunted* .

The meeting room's long, black table carved with sloping edges in a retro-modern style was littered with copies of the meeting minutes, scribbled on yellow notepads, a wide assortment of PDAs, and dirty coffee cups. Somebody had brought doughnuts and there were three artificially flavored strawberry ones left. Seto gathered his papers up with a nod to the room. "Then, let's get on that. And, Nakajima?"

A conservative-looking, middle aged Japanese man from his security department raised his head. There was something of his past Japanese Army career that would be forever reflected in his eyes. A good trait as far as the CEO was concerned.

"Good job out there in front of the hospital last week. I didn't want the press to cause me trouble."

There was a very low bow in response to that. It was no secret to Seto that Nakajima had felt a crushing blow to Jounouchi being shot

at the tournament. This was an important event for the company and the victim was his boss' classmate. And, for awhile, rumor at Kaiba Corp was that he would be replaced with his assistant, Matsushita Fumi-a beautiful and somewhat ruthless micromanager who modeled her hair and makeup after American movie stars. With the exceptions of Kaiba Seto and her immediate boss, she spoke informally with an edge that promised pain should she not be obeyed or kept in the loop regarding every single detail that was within her sphere of influence.

When Matsushita Fumi got to work each day, she approached it as though everyone in the world was stupid and needed her guidance-by charming them into submission or simply crushing them. That was how she got this far.

Nakajima Nagare, a straight shooter, didn't like her and always would. The feeling was mutual, though, because he had the job she wanted so badly.

The room had cleared out fairly quickly-the smokers, Fumi being one of them, and the caffeine addicted making their way toward the vending machines. Seto picked up his cup of half-cooled dark roasted coffee and took a sip as he made his way out. "I'll be going to the hospital again all week," he said over his shoulder at Nakajima. "Make sure that he's well guarded. If the press sneaks in, I'll have someone's hide for it."

"Yes sir." Nakajima gave nod.

Jounouchi had been shot at the tournament the week before summer vacation. Now, they were a week into it-which made things, for the short-term, easier. Instead of working full days, the young CEO spent half of his time at the hospital along with Jou's father.

At first Yugi and Anzu thought it was strange. Unlike the rest of their friends who had part-time jobs that took up most of their time because of set schedules, Seto had intentionally made his schedule

flexible to be at the hospital. Later, Yugi and Anzu just came to accept it as a bizarre "norm" and decided, among themselves, that Seto was trying to either make a friend or to ease his guilty conscience. Anzu's vote was "both."

Dully, Seto sat in the chair as he watched Yugi and Anzu leave to go home and get a bite of dinner. He'd suggested that they come back in the morning because Jou wouldn't wake up until then. It was even easier to get rid of "The Old Man," as Seto thought of Jounouchi Katashi-san. They'd sit in relative silence for about ten to fifteen minutes with the news on TV filling the foreground. Then, Seto would bring up the subject of taking another smoking break followed by a limo ride back to the hotel. From their short conversations, he'd gotten the drift that the elder Jounouchi was developing a slight crush on one of the nurses. He seemed to know when it was her break time, too. And the young CEO knew how to take advantage of that.

The body in the bed tossed and turned. Blue eyes watched.

Jounouchi had small bouts of wakefulness throughout the day now. It was true that he slept fitfully most of the time. But, for some reason, Seto's presence helped. Just being in the room allowed the blond to relax and fall into a deep sleep. He even snored a few times-much to the amusement of the visitors in the room. But, it was Yugi who noticed it first and had a quiet word with Seto in the hallway-asking him to visit everyday, if he could, until Jounouchi got better.

Ordinarily, the CEO would have instantly said "no" to any wimpy request from Yugi. But, realizing the truth behind the words, he gave a begrudging "fine," which made his soul lighten.

Sitting beside Jounouchi, who no longer needed the mask over his face, Seto seemed to have resigned something within himself. It was as though he'd given up something, let go of it, for the greater good. And, where Jounouchi was concerned, he wasn't sure what that was, however...

Honey colored eyes cracked open. "Kai... ba?"

Seto turned slowly and leaned in. "Something?" He tried to force his voice into sounding normally.

"Oh... you're here... and..." He glanced around the room. The last rays of sunset were streaming through the blinds and the room was darkening. He quirked a tired grin. "Thanks."

"You didn't answer my question," Seto returned.

"Yeah... I know." A faint, boyish grin. "Nothing, but thanks."

"You sure?" Kaiba said with an edge of concern as he took his seat again next to the bed. "You're not just trying to play tough guy, huh?"

"I'm a tough mutt," Jou whispered back.

"Mutt?" He raised a delicate eyebrow. That was the name he always used for Jou when they argued at school. The fights would often start with name calling. Now, those memories held some regret, too.

"Yeah..." A slight smirk followed. "Mutt... After all, you named me." Jou chuckled until he realized that he was the only one who thought it was funny.

"Stop it," Seto sighed. "You've always hated that name."

"Yeah... but, it's okay now... somehow."

Jounouchi looked into Seto's face and suddenly got the same images over and over again. They were disjointed, pictures and feelings locked together. They were important and just beyond his grasp. If he tried hard enough, he could get dream images of a white yukata with gold dragonflies embroidered, cherry blossoms falling onto him, and a bridge. Voices. His. Kaiba's. Tones, but no words. Everything else was shrouded in mist and, all too soon, faded away.

Jou cringed, coming back to himself after he shifted in bed and caused his stitches to hurt like hell. He breathed, forcing the throbbing pain to fade. He wondered how long his mind been drifting. It was no good to dwell on it, though. But, the thought lingered no matter how hard Jounouchi tried.

Then, he felt it again. The hand in his and slightly concerned blue eyes searching his face. "Are you okay?"

"I-I just moved wrong," he explained, "been in this bed for awhile now."

With a slight blush, Jounouchi laced their fingers and closed his eyes, too embarrassed to see his reaction. Holding hands? Them? Yes, he was taking a risk, but the feeling was so natural. Plus, the fact that he'd gotten accustomed to Seto's concerned looks-motivated from guilt, he guessed-but, it felt good not to fight. In fact, this was the longest conversation that they'd had since the incident. And, oddly, it was the longest one they'd ever had without insults or arguing.

Jou squeezed their hands a little. He wondered if Seto would allow this for very long. *Surely... not*, he sighed to himself as he started to drift off again.

The pain was down to a dull throb now. He could ignore it if he really tried. And he did try.

Jou waited for the hand to withdraw. Some part of his consciousness lingered, hanging on the edge of sleep until he, finally, slipped away.

But, the hand held firm and anchored him to this world.

After all, that was Seto's job.

They were talking in the room. Jounouchi could hear them and remained still, his eyes closed.

"Well, I think it's a good thing for my son to hang out with you." There was the stench of cigarette smoke. It sprawled out its fingers and began to taint the clean, antiseptic room with an unpleasant staleness.

Dad.

"Hey, it's not just the guys. I care about him, too. He's been such a good friend to me."

Anzu.

"I agree, we really have been lucky. We've had so many adventures together, huh?"

Yugi.

"Well, friendship aside, school resumes soon and we'll need to arrange for his homework to be sent from school so that he can keep up."

K-Kaiba...?

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room for whatever reason, Jou couldn't discern it but he could feel it. Mostly, it was radiating from Kaiba and a part, a quiet little part of himself, wanted to appease him-as though that were necessary. It felt so odd because he was used to fighting with Kaiba, not making him happy.

"Well, I'll be needin' to go back to work in a few days or I'll lose my job. So, I was wondering if someone could drop by the house and see my kiddo... You know..." The voice turned in Kaiba's direction. "Visit with him."

The young CEO sighed openly and his footsteps sounded in the direction of where Jou knew his father to be or where Jou guessed he was standing. "I doubt... sincerely... that he would be able to care for himself in your home," Seto said coldly over some comment

that came from Yugi's mouth that was nothing more than "babble" in Seto's opinion. "Therefore, I will have him room at the mansion with me and my younger brother, Mokuba. The staff can manage day to day tasks, and I will send you text messages on his progress."

"Really Kaiba-kun?" Anzu said, fairly impressed at the generosity.

"I just said it, didn't I?" Kaiba growled.

"How wonderful! I'll feel so much better knowing you'll be looking after him," Jounouchi-san said. There was a falsely cheerful tone that made Jou feel awkward to the point of sick.

"So, now, I can have the limo drive all three of you to whatever destination you need." He turned to Yugi. "You said you were going to lunch anyway."

"Oh, that's right," he agreed.

Seto sat down as three sets of feet made it to the door and through it.

Seto settled in the chair which was surprisingly comfortable. Well, either that or his butt was getting used to it.

"They're gone now, Jounouchi. So, you can quit pretending to be asleep."

Honey colored eyes opened slowly. He didn't bother to stretch or fake a yawn.

"So... uh..." He laughed sheepishly with a hand behind his head. "I guess... you're... kind of stuck with me."

Blue eyes narrowed at the words "stuck with."

Misunderstanding it all, Jou added, "I'll do whatever the doctors say, get better, and disappear as quickly as I can."

Blue eyes narrowed at him even more.

"No... you'll do as I say..."

He leaned in and Jounouchi swallowed hard.

They were so close. Too close.

Jou could barely breathe the words, "Uh....okay?"

"Good. That's what I want to hear."

Putting Jounouchi's father on the airplane was one of the greatest pleasures he'd had in a long time. The limo driver had texted him ten minutes ago with the good news. Now, all he had to do was get rid of the Geek Squad and he'd be *very happy* .

Seto was still working half days at the office and, now that school was back in session, evenings with Jounouchi-tutoring him. The Geek Squad had a nasty habit of showing up just when Jou was getting it in math or was focused on a historical topic that was sure to be tested on later. It took all of his effort to keep from yelling at Yugi, Honda, Anzu, and, sometimes, other "little friends" from school who, he suspected, was more interested *in him* than the poor patient in the bed. Still, he couldn't prove it beyond the shadow of a doubt, so he simply tolerated it with gritted teeth.

And, each time, Jou would flash him a slight "Aw, come on... Ya can put up with them for fifteen minutes, right?" look which took the wind out of his sails.

Seto would lean back in the chair, huff something that sounded like a recognition that they were there, and open his laptop to drown out the "Buddy! Hi! How ya doing tonight?" and other, far too cheerful, words assaulting him.

Usually, Anzu would sit on the corner of Jou's bed and remark, "He's looking much better."

She did it again and Seto raised an eyebrow at Anzu. It was crude for a single girl to sit on a guy's bed-even if he was in the hospital. She was being far too familiar. And it pissed him off.

Then, Yugi joined her.

Now, Seto's blood boiled and he wanted to pitch the whole lot of them unceremoniously out the door.

"Kaiba's tutoring me again," Jou said happily. He pointed to the tray stand where his snacks, sent over by Mokuba, were usually kept. Now, however, it had a small stack of text books and papers. "He doesn't have to," he added diplomatically and noted with a smile that it seemed to stroke the young CEO's ego, "but, I'm grateful."

"Oh, well," Yugi said with a wide grin, turning his head left and right to see the two young men where were now getting along famously, "we won't keep you."

That seemed to cause a smirk to crawl up on Kaiba's face and, this time, even Anzu noticed it.

"Why is...?" she began only to have a small hand on her shoulder and Yugi interrupting with, "Gotta go." He grabbed Jounouchi's hand and gave it a squeeze. "See ya later."

Jounouchi's honey colored eyes brightened. "Yeah, Yug... Thanks for coming by to see me."

When they got to the door, Yugi turned and asked, "Oh, yes... When are they letting you go out of here."

"Ordinarily, I'd have to stay for, at least, another three weeks. But..."

Seto sighed impatiently and then interrupted with, "I promised his father I'd look after him. So, he'll be coming back to the mansion with

me and a select hospital staff on call twenty four hours a day."

"Wow!" a chunky, brunette girl said, peeking behind Anzu. Seto recognized her as one of his own "fan girls" and rolled his eyes openly at the way she kept staring at him with adoration. Not once did she say a kind word to Jounouchi. If she had been smart, she never would have come in the first place. "Does that mean we can come visit at the Kaiba Mansion?" The hint for an invitation was follow-ed up with a giggle.

Jou glanced at Kaiba and noted his great annoyance. Exactly what was eating him, he didn't know. "I'll leave that up to him. I'll only be a guest."

Kaiba closed his laptop with a crisp snap. "They're your... friends." He said the last word with distaste. "I'll be at work anyway. So, it doesn't matter."

The fangirl frowned a bit at that news.

"You're a good guy, Kaiba," Jou said under his breath to where only Seto could hear clearly. Then, to the others he said, "So, please visit me, huh?"

And the room laughed with Kaiba scowling as he put his laptop under his chair. He was surrounded by mostly well-meaning idiots. But they were idiots just the same.

The reporter looked up at the camera, dripping with excitement. This was a good story and she'd milk it for all it was worth. They'd probably run the video again at ten.

"Tanaka Yuuta... has escaped from jail right from under the noses of The Domino Police this afternoon." She paused for dramatic effect until the director in the booth grumped at her to continue on with the story. She gave a slight wink at him.

"Tanaka, who was taken into police custody two and a half weeks ago, and still stands accused of shooting duelist Jounouchi Katsuya at a tournament in Domino City recently, slipped away from a holding area for prisoners and into what was supposed to be a locked room behind a courtroom. According to sources, a court officer spotted him and, thinking he was a lawyer in a three piece suit, allowed him to leave the premises."

She pulled a black strand of her glossy hair behind her ear.

"We will be keeping you up to date as this story unfolds... Once again, let's show you the footage we have of Jounouchi Katsuya's shooting at..."

"Off," Seto growled as he aimed the TV remote at the television. It had been lying next to Jounouchi's hand the whole time but the young man didn't seem to notice-his eyes riveted on the first few moments of footage with the small images of himself and Tanaka on the screen, the opponent raising a gun and, then, the TV went blank.

It was as though all of the life had drained from the frail young man. "Thanks... Kaiba," he said absently.

Seto opened his fingers and allowed the remote to hit the bed. "No problem," he grumbled as he sat down in the chair that was quickly becoming "his chair" in the room.

Jounouchi turned to him. "I appreciate it... really."

There was a far away look in his eyes that Seto hated. He knew that it would happen someday, but now was not the time for Jou to get a front row seat of his own shooting. This was the time for him to heal, not worry about his shooter escaping.

"You're safe and I'm with you. So, nothing can happen."

Jou shook his head, bloody images filling his mind. "You can't make that promise and I won't hold you to it."

A dark shadow passed over Seto's face. "Are you telling me that I'm not capable of protecting one single... Mutt?"

Jou smiled at that attempt to start an argument-just like the old days. *He's trying to distract me by arguing. So, I must really be getting better, huh?*

The smile grew slightly wider and more apologetic. "I can't make you responsible for me. I'll be fine."

"Of course... you will," Seto agreed in a bored tone, trying to hide his impatience with Jou as he opened his laptop up to see if he'd gotten any e-mails from Kaiba Corp. "... Because I'll be supervising you."

"Wha-?" Honey colored eyes took on a shocked appearance. "I'm not someone you can just 'supervise' because you want to. I don't work for you."

"I gave your father my word that I would look after you," Seto said while clicking the icon that would let him into his e-mail. "So, that's what I intend to do." He pulled out a pair of reading glasses from his breast pocket and Jou blinked at that in surprise.

He needs glasses? He doesn't wear them at school.

"I consider it an oral contract with your father. Thus, I intend to honor it." Blue eyes scanned the title of the first message and he deleted it without opening it. "I hate spam," he murmured, clicking the mouse. Then, he glanced at the bizarre stare Jou was still giving him-eyes riveted on his reading glasses. "And, for the record, I wear contacts to school because these things," he took off the glasses, "make me look like a geek."

"Not a geek..." Jou denied with a shake of his head.

There was a slightly curled smile coming from the young CEO. "Then, what, pray tell, would I be? To you, at least?"

Jou folded his arms and looked away, a blush forming. "I haven't decided yet."

Author's note: This kind of prisoner escape actually happened in New York City recently.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5

"Why do I have to sit in this thing? I'm not a total invalid, you know." Jou crossed his arms over his chest and pouted-turning his face away. He felt like he was on display.

"That's because," the middle aged male nurse shot back, "a bullet wound is a puncture wound. Though, bullets have the option of bouncing around inside the body."

Jou turned back, looking over his shoulder, and shot him a sick look. "Ugh! That's horrible, Kudo-san!"

"Horrible? You ought to try cleaning such a wound after the doctors are finished." The nurse smiled knowingly as he pushed the wheelchair up towards the elaborate Kaiba Mansion nestled among ornate gardens and fragrant fruit trees. The man pushing the wheelchair had strong, beefy arms-perfect for lifting patients who'd fallen to the floor unexpectedly-and a caring nature as well as a head for the latest medical techniques. His only problem came in the form of gender discrimination. He would have been better off in America, he knew, but his young wife and small children refused to leave the country. So, for their sakes, he stayed in Japan and worked as a private nurse when he could-occasionally in mental institutions and occasionally for Kaiba Corp execs with jealous wives.

Or, in this case, an overprotective "Kaiba-sama."

The door opened with Mokuba on the other side seemingly wide eyed and bushy tailed-barely able to control his excitement. In contrast, Kaiba Seto stood behind his little brother with a seemingly bored look on his face. He had his mobile phone pressed to his ear with "Have that done for me by five this evening, Matsushita. If not,

I'll be speaking to your boss, Nakajima." He snapped the phone shut without saying goodbye.

Kudo didn't know what to make of it. He glanced at Jou who seemed more embarrassed to be there than anything, a light blush on his cheeks. And, he guessed, the blond young man felt that he was a burden to these people who were not exactly his family. Kudo remembered meeting, briefly, Jou's father just before his flight back. All had been arranged and Kaiba-sama was the responsible type who could afford to care for his still recovering school friend. Well, Kudo guessed that they were friends privately even though, in the public eye, they appeared to be the opposite. The nurse eyed the brothers as he pushed the wheelchair through the front door with the limo driver, carrying a bag with Jou's things, following closely behind.

All of that bickering and rivalry must be for the cameras, Kudo deduced. He noticed that a certain pair of blue eyes were watching Jou. Concern, masked as much as possible, was on the young CEO's face. But there was no mistaking it. Years and years of nursing had taught him that much. And it was a bit of a relief for the nurse. So, he was bringing in his patient into a good place with supportive people, and that made him feel more at ease because Jounouchi's father, friendly as the man was, had something artificial about him.

"He'll be in the first bedroom on the ground floor," Mokuba said with a gesture to the left. "We've converted one of the rooms from a sitting room to a bedroom with private bath," the child prattled as he walked along side the wheelchair.

Jou glanced at Mokuba. "Sorry for the trouble."

"It's no big deal," Mokuba said with a grin. "Nii-sama is letting me bring in a bunch of game systems to hook up to your TV. So, we can play a lot! Best of all, I've got..."

"Homework to do," Seto cut in with steely sharp eyes.

Mokuba grinned up at him winningly but his smile was a bit stiff. "Nii-sama...?"

"Homework," he repeated.

"Uh... yeah... Should have done it sooner, huh?"

"Once we get in, would you like to rest, Jounouchi-kun?" Kudo asked kindly.

The blond nodded. "I'd like to stretch out on the bed for a bit."

"Good idea," the nurse said, turning into the bedroom. "I'll get you something to snack on and I'll be back."

There was a plate of wheat crackers with thin slices of sharp cheddar cheese between them on the night stand next to a steaming cup of green tea, a TV remote, and an expensive, antique brass lamp.

There were brief murmurs of "see ya" and "back later." And soon enough, the room cleared out with the exception of Kaiba Seto. While Jou had been settling in, he'd taken the time to change his clothes. Seto was now dressed casually, for him, wearing skin tight black Italian jeans and a dark blue button down shirt with the first three mother of pearl buttons unbuttoned.

"Just wanna stretch out for a minute." Jou, making some effort to support himself with a bent arm so that he didn't go "flopping" down hard, tried to recline from his awkward sitting position, but gave up when the burning pain returned-putting a hand to his fresh bandages. "It's no big..." He took a quick breath. Still applying pressure, Jou made another attempt to lie down.

The bed dipped in a spot right next to him unexpectedly and Jou looked. "K-Kaiba?"

Seto was sitting there, regarding him with vague curiosity.

"What's going... on?" Jounouchi asked, feeling off kilter.

"I'm trying to decide if you need help or not."

Jou laughed in a short, barkish way. "I may feel like Hell, but I can handle myself."

"Which is why I got you the nurse," Seto said evenly. "You *handling* things..."

His jaw dropped. "Wha-? You don't trust me?" The blond pointed a thumb at himself. "I'll have you know that I've been taking care of myself for a long, long time... without anybody around," he bragged back.

Seto's eyes narrowed at him. "Just how long would that be?"

A question.

Not good...

Jou nipped his bottom lip. He wasn't supposed to talk about that. That was one of the "no subjects" he was forbidden to tell to anyone- or so his father had said all that time ago. Had it been years? Probably. If teachers or neighbors discovered his situation, he might be sent to his mother's place and he would never lay eyes on Yugi or his other friends ever again. Add to the fact that his mother was not the saint that he pretended her to be. How could she since she was the one who had married his father? The woman had a sharp tongue. The woman despised Duel Monsters and anyone associated with the "stupid game." She had a way of undermining his self-confidence at the core with just a look-in a twisted, hurtful way that Kaiba Seto could never manage.

"I can handle myself," he went on lamely. "No worries." Honey colored eyes went to Seto. "And, soon enough, I'll get well and will be out of your hair." He hoped that his promises were reassuring.

Seto took Jou by the forearm and put a hand to his back for support. "Lie down and be quiet." Then, he raised an eyebrow and added, "But, that may be too much to ask of you."

Now, stretched out but with his legs hanging over the foot of the bed, Jou turned his head in Seto's direction-blond hair splayed out on the dark green comforter. "I'll be a good mutt... you'll see." He gave a winning smile.

"You'd better be," Seto remarked, stretching with a long arm in the direction of the TV remote. Taking it from the nightstand, he turned his attention back to Jounouchi-lying down with a smooth motion.

They were together, side by side, with his shoulder and Jou's about an inch apart. Even this close, the blond could smell cologne. Seto favored Cool Water Deep. The light scent was inviting.

"What do you want to watch?"

Jou scratched his chin in thought. "Anything... Anything but the news. I don't want to see... again..."

"I understand."

Jou looked at the ceiling, trying to put his thoughts in order. "That guy... when he was up close... dueling... he seemed like..." The blond shrugged awkwardly. "He seemed like a fan, ya know?" Then, Jou took a breath and let it out slowly. "But, on the news, and at a distance... Those clothes... That face... I hate to say it but, that guy kind of looked like... *you*."

The final word was quiet and pained. How could he say that after all that Kaiba had done for him? Jou felt awful inside, eaten with guilt. Maybe, Yugi was right. "Just because something is the truth, it doesn't mean you should say it."

"Does that bother you?" Seto's voice broke Jou out of his thoughts.

Honey colored eyes dimmed for a second. "You'd never hurt me like that. You'd never do something so awful to me. I know because..."

"That wasn't my question." The voice seemed strangely calm.

Jou closed his eyes. "I know..." The blond duelist shook his head, frustrated with himself. "I guess... Yes, I guess it does because I... deep down, I really like..."

"It doesn't matter," Seto cut in before Jou confessed more-more than what he was comfortable with.

"Kaiba?"

"I said that it doesn't matter."

That got him an awkward look and, mentally, Seto shrugged it off. It was fine. He'd find a way to make everything better again. He had to for some reason that was totally inexplicable. Call it "gut" or "instinct." Dwelling upon it, the only logical conclusion that came to Seto was that it felt normal to be this way together-to protect Jou instead of fighting with him.

"So... uh... whatever you want to watch. I'm fine with it. Just no news."

Seto hummed an agreement as he pushed the "on" button. The television blinked and then colors began to appear on the blank screen. He pushed "70" and got the listings. Usually, he'd watch the financial news channel or the business channel right about now. But, he was certain that the blond wouldn't enjoy that. In fact, his companion probably didn't know what business speak was anyway and if, by some miracle, he'd bother to watch, there would be too many questions or the need to translate.

"Jounouchi?"

"Hm?" came a tired voice to the side. "Oi, wait... you're supposed to call me 'Mutt,' remember?" There was a bit of amusement threaded in the comment.

"Fine... *Mutt*... We'll have to wait a few minutes until the listings all roll again."

"Okay" was followed by a sigh and they remained like that in companionable silence. It felt good. In fact, more than good. Seto actually found himself enjoying the peace. It made life much more manageable.

The listings started again and the young CEO turned to him. "Jou? Do you want to watch...?"

Soft, blond hair met his vision as Jounouchi's head rolled to the side. He was dozing and his breaths were becoming more and more even with each passing second.

Seto scratched his temple with an index finger. "I suppose, I could just turn this off."

"No..." Jou whined while dozing. "Love the TV... ya know?" There was a soft hum followed by "stay."

Seto could see a hand searching for his. They hadn't held hands all day, in fact, with Jou leaving from the hospital and all of the preparations that had to be completed. Jou's hand slid very slowly across the comforter-looking for its mate.

Seto sighed to himself, scooting his body closer and allowing Jou's head to rest lightly against his shoulder. He, in turn, took the wayward hand and laced it with his own. Seto gave a side glance to watch Jou's face. It was peaceful, painless, and trouble free.

Seto didn't know what this was between them or what it was turning out to be. He only knew that being with Jounouchi filled a void in his

life that he never noticed before. Well, there was that, and the fact that holding Jou's hand made the world seem right.

"This is lunacy," he half-whispered to himself. "I'm such an idiot."

"Me... too," Jou mumbled, rubbing his cheek into a firm shoulder.

"Me... too...."

In a back alley behind a bakery, Tanaka Yuuta was searching trashcans. He was trying not to be frantic about it. Keeping his wits about him was always a special skill. But, he was running out of time. Someone could spot him from the street as they passed by. Tanaka was still wearing the clothes that he tore off of that drunk's body last night. He'd probably never get the stench off of his skin, but it was worth it.

"That note said that it would be here. But which one?"

He shook one can and got an infuriated, high pitched "squee" from a startled-he hoped-rat. If it wasn't a rat, then, he didn't want to know about it.

Tanaka tried the green recycling cans next and hit the jackpot. He pulled out a large, white cardboard box. It had something that had been scribbled over in black marker. It seemed to be a logo. Ignoring it for the time being, Tanaka ripped open the box and took out the set of clothes: dark green shirt, black pants, black socks. Putting a large, folded piece of paper aside, he found a men's bifold wallet with money, a fake passport-which he flipped open that said "Jon Cho" and that he was suddenly a Chinese American from Chicago, and, in the very bottom, a dagger.

Tanaka sat down next to the recycling cans-letting them block any view of him from the street. He examined the long piece of paper.

"What is this...?" he asked himself as he unfolded.

It appeared to be the plans of a house. "A really big place we've got here," Tanaka mumbled until he caught the address and realized what the place actually was. It made his hands shake just thinking about it. Why couldn't he stop trembling? This was fantastic news! He was to go inside the Kaiba Mansion. Of course, Tanaka didn't need the address. He knew it by heart. It was the home of his idol. He'd kept that issue of the home and gardening magazine that featured the renovations to Kaiba's home that he made last year. The silk curtains and "White Chocolate" furniture with subtle fabric patterns made by Dior which was, in his opinion, the perfect setting for a man who controlled so much in the world. White. Pristine. Perfect. Kaiba Seto was perfect-perfect in every way, even when he was ruthless. It was kindness, when Tanaka really thought about it. Like ripping off a band aid. Things had to be done that way for the greater good.

The house plans were in blue and white with rooms labeled in a crisp font-making the Japanese easier to read. There was a small piece of paper taped to the corner. The words printed on it were: "The caged bird's room is in red ink. Do a better job of it this time."

"Bird?" Tanaka's eyes widened with the realization. "No! That Jounouchi trash is in the Kaiba Mansion?" He shook his head "no." It was impossible to think that the guy would even be allowed through the front door. Besides, he was supposed to be in the hospital. Wouldn't it be too soon to let him out?

He allowed his finger to trace the rooms until he came upon one underlined in red ink. "Says it's some kind of sitting room." Then, in red ink under that, he noted the printed word "bedroom." Tanaka almost choked on his saliva. It was impossible that Kaiba Seto would turn that room into a bedroom. His finger traced one floor up. Kaiba's room was on top. They shared a ceiling-practically roommates.

Tanaka's eyes darkened and he closed his fingers around the dagger resting in his palm. Whatever mistake this was or however it came to be, he would get to the bottom of it and save his hero the dishonor of being associated with that Jou-Loser.

Searching for any other clues, he ran his fingers across the whole page. More red ink. It was a date seven days from now along with a time. Small "X" marks showed a path. "A way in." He smiled to himself. They wanted him in. He could figure that much out. There was a half thumbprint, somewhat greasy, on the edge of the page in tan. Whoever was holding it, he surmised.

"I'll deal with this and end it."

He refolded the page along the crease lines and began to shed his clothing-getting into the new set provided to him. The stale scent of tobacco wafted to him. Silently, Tanaka wondered if he could stop by a convenience store to get some cigs. It had been forever since he had some.

But cravings were all that he had now.

"That was great! What do you want to play now, Jounouchi?" Mokuba asked distractedly as he dug through the pile of games. "Halo 3?"

Jou rebuttoned that stubborn middle button to his green silk pajamas-a gift from Seto-and curled his lip. "I was just shot and you ask me to play Halo?"

Mokuba visibly sweatdropped and went back to digging through the pile. Now, it was mostly to keep himself busy. "Sorry," he said quietly. He'd been having so much fun sitting on the bed and playing video games on the plasma TV sitting in front of them that he'd forgotten. It had been awhile since he had company or brotherly attention. Mostly, he hated that he'd ruined the moment. "Really, Jounouchi....I'm sorry I... didn't mean to... I..."

"Didn't mean to... *what*?" Seto was leaning in the doorway against the frame as the male nurse passed by in the hallway with a knowing smile on his face.

Jou's grin broadened unnaturally wide when he saw the young CEO. "Oh, ummm... We were just playing games. That's all." He picked up a game box at random and without looking at it he said, "I really suck at this one."

Mokuba glanced at the game and smacked a hand over his face.

"I'm certain that you are," Seto drawled, taking the box and glancing at the back. "There's no way you would be good at Princess Pogo Stick's Exotic Adventures in The Crab Nebulae." He gave his trademark smirk. "You're not old enough to play."

Jou's face twisted into confusion as Seto turned to his younger brother. "This one's marked 'M' for mature and should have been rated 'H' for hentai."

"It's not that bad!" Mokuba countered but with a blush coming to him. "I know that it has some partial nudity. But I found it very educational. It talks about space!"

"The only 'space' in this game," Seto debated, "is between Princess Pogo Stick's... ears ." He was tempted to say something else but decided not to.

Jounouchi chuckled behind his hand. "Honestly, Kaiba, I was just being random and I didn't even play that game once. I didn't know it existed." It was easier to come clean.

"My thoughts exactly," Seto drawled, "because you don't seem the type to want to travel the universe in a flimsy, pink tu-tu and a pogo stick."

Jou thought for a second that Seto winked at him, but it must have been his imagination.

"You'd freeze to death before you got to the first planet anyway."

Jou groaned while fighting back a grin. Playfully, he put hands to his chest as though wounded by the words. "You would take away my pogo stick if you found out about it. I'll just have to keep that as a deep, dark secret."

"That's it. I'm leaving," Mokuba grumped-flicking off the TV and putting up the game system in the black armoire, gathering up the games in the basket, and placing the lot in the bottom right corner before closing the armoire doors. He went to Seto and said, "Oops, forgot one..." trying to get the game back. It didn't work, of course, and, in response, his brother raised the game high, out of reach.

"I believe I'll keep this one."

Mokuba was tempted to jump for it but, instead, he smiled with a sickening sweetness. "You can have it." With a brief wave to the two, he left out the door with a quick "Enjoy playing it with your boyfriend while I'm gone."

"Boyfriend?" Jounouchi said, looking surprised.

Excuse me! What did he just say? "Boyfriend?" he thought and ran his fingers through his chestnut hair.

Seto took a seat on the edge of the bed sighing "brothers" under his breath.

Jou moved closer to sit next to Seto. He placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "I've got a sister. It's not exactly the same situation, but I think a big brother's feelings are same... no matter what." He smiled at the memories of her. "Trying to do what's best instead of what's easy... You know, she wanted to see me in the hospital but with Dad here, I just couldn't let her. Mom would pitch a fit and things are so calm... finally... that I..." He trailed off, not wanting to finish.

Home hurt. It always did but he tried not to think about it on most days. Why was it that when he was with Kaiba Seto, now, he was

able to see things so clearly? Or was it that he felt safe enough to look at his life in small doses?

Jou blinked when he noticed blue eyes staring at him. A quick grin. "Sorry, I really should mind my own business." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "I just..." A shrug when nothing came to him. "Sorry," he said lamely

"Don't worry about it." Seto picked up the TV remote and turned on one of the music channels. Music seemed safe and acceptable as long as it was kept down low. He'd try that. "But you seem tired," he went on.

"Well... kinda..."

Seto got up from the bed, fisted the covers over the right pillow, and pulled back. "Try to sleep." He gestured to the bed.

For some reason that escaped him, Jou's heartbeat picked up. His face flushed a little and he had to look away.

"Bed... now," Seto stated evenly.

"Uh....yeah, right."

Usually, he would be able to crawl over to the top of the bed to stretch out, but with his injury, he couldn't. Bracing himself, he stood from the bed and walked as casually as he could around it. To his surprise, Seto was still waiting there.

Slightly confused, Jou slipped in between the sheets and felt Seto leaning over him, pulling the covers across him. "If you need anything...?"

Jounouchi was about to open his mouth when he stopped himself. It was a stupid request and Seto was busy. So, it was better to not say anything at all. Keep his trap shut.

"Okay, out with it."

"Huh?"

"I know that it's something... Another snack? A drink? A trip to the bathroom?" He raised an eyebrow in expectation.

Jou tilted his head down and looked at the sheets, picking at non-existent fuzz. "Well... it's kinda dumb..."

An hour had passed and Seto's back was becoming unbearably stiff. He was propped up on massive pillows, next to Jou in the bed-under the sheets and fully clothed. The blond, content with his bedmate beside him, had fallen asleep. In the beginning, it was simply his head on the brunette's shoulder. Fifteen minutes after that, with a whisper of silk and the green-pajama clad body sliding down, it was Jou's head resting in the CEO's lap with the stern young man slightly frowning at the indignity of it all. What if someone should stop by to visit? By the end of it, Seto had settled in with an extra throw blanket being tossed over Jou's shoulders because he'd curled himself into such an odd position that his upper body wasn't covered by the sheets anymore.

A deep, slow sigh followed by "K-a-i-b-a...." moaned like rich, dark chocolate.

He raised a curious eyebrow at his name being spoken that way-which made him wait ten minutes more to see how this dream would turn out. And, by the sound of the guilty chuckles, "Oh, no... not there," and down right purring, it was quite *some dream* .

Seto folded his arms against his chest. It was so hard to be good. Now, he didn't even trust himself to hold hands. *Stupid Mutt... enjoying himself like that...*

Nevertheless, life was getting interesting.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6

He had to wake up at 5:30 am to get to work on time with only the blue-blackness of predawn greeting him. But morning came soon enough with light streaming, now, through the Italian lace curtains and Kudo stifled a yawn as he entered Jounouchi's room with a breakfast tray he'd practically wrestled away from a nosey little thing wearing a ruffled black and white servant's uniform. True, she was young and cute. But if she gave him more grief in the future, he'd have a word with Kaiba-sama.

Kudo tried to yawn again but struggled to keep his lips closed-making a ridiculous face in the process. With both hands occupied by the overloaded tray, he wasn't in a position to cover his mouth. And yawning over food was just plain repulsive.

In his head, Kudo began to recite the list of things he needed to do. He planned on waking the patient, having him eat breakfast, and, then, bathing the young man which would be followed by a thorough cleaning of the healing wound. Kudo had seen what he feared were some early signs of infection. So, by being diligent, he was certain that he could spare some possible pain and setbacks by keeping a close eye on his patient.

"Jounouchi-kun, I..." He stopped in his tracks. The tray rattled dangerously-plates, silverware, and food sloshing.

In the large bed, Kaiba Seto was lying back on over stuffed pillows-still fully dressed in the clothes from the previous day-with his head tilted to the right. In his lap, snoring contentedly, was the blond patient's shaggy head. Kaiba's hand was cupped kindly against Jounouchi's cheek. In his sleep, Jou seemed to be pressing his face against the warmth.

" *Oh... so, they're like that,*" Kudo said as almost a gasp. He blinked at the sight and thought, *Their rivalry makes sense now. It's not just a bunch of antics and play acting for the cameras. It's to hide their relationship.*

He smirked at the peaceful face that Kaiba-sama was making. Certainly, no one outside of this room was privy to that. And while this was, indeed, rather fun, this nurse had a job to do. *Best get on with it*, he thought as another playful smirk came to him. Then, remembering the "privacy clause" that he signed before taking the lucrative job, and seeing how it all suddenly made sense, he smoothed out his rugged features and knocked gently on the open door.

Kaiba Seto suddenly popped up a bit too quickly and rubbed his right eye with the heel of his hand. "Wha-?"

"Good morning," Kudo said crisply, placing the breakfast tray on the nightstand.

"Oh... Oh!" Seto's blue eyes widened impossibly. He'd been caught like this with Jou. And, for a second, it pissed him off. He'd worried about it last night, but Jou was needing comfort and reassurances. Somehow, words weren't enough and he knew it the way he knew his own name. Now, Seto could feel his heart thumping hard and guessed that his face must be tinted pink. It was embarrassing on the surface. He wanted to say something-smooth everything over with a few words-make it all seem okay and normal. But, inside, it was already *normal* . So, confusion reigned briefly in the early morning zombie-mindset that usually comes with waking abruptly.

Jou moaned a protest. The hand cupping his cheek had disappeared. Moreover, the lap he was sleeping on had shifted unexpectedly, and he did not want to get up or leave the warm spot that he'd found himself in. He had been secure, content. And it was the best sleep that he'd had in months-even with the aching wound biting into him every time he "moved wrong."

"Breakfast," Kudo offered as the smell of apple cinnamon oatmeal filled the room. There was also toast, juice, and a bowl full of berries.

Jounouchi sniffed at it, and Seto raised an eyebrow at the puppyish way the blond young man's nose twitched.

"Food but... sleepy..." he sighed. Decisions, decisions.

Seto folded his arms at his bedmate and stared down without much approval. "You need to eat to keep your strength up."

"That's very true, Kaiba-sama," Kudo agreed easily. Then, noting the two together, "I'll be back to get the tray in about thirty minutes. Please let me know if you need anything else sooner." And given a stern nod by a slightly blushing CEO with head tilted down toward his bedmate, Kudo left with a growing smile. He was given a rare look at the inside of Kaiba Seto's life and saw it as a privilege. Too bad he was too honest and could never tell anybody. It would be a juicy story to tell-Kaiba Seto's heart had been captured and it wasn't by a Trap Card.

"Yes? Yes, this is Jounouchi Katashi speaking." Jounouchi's father spoke the words impatiently into his mobile phone as he tossed his half-smoked cigarette down, crushing it with his steel-toed boot. He hated doing that. It was a perfectly good cig, but his smoking break would be over in less than five minutes and smoking on site wasn't allowed. So, he was in a dark mood. (Not to mention, he didn't appreciate somebody suddenly calling him out of the blue.)

Katashi scratched his ass with his free hand. "Look," he went on before allowing the other person to speak, "let me save you a lot of time. If you're wanting me to switch my insurance, I'd have to say 'no' because I take the train, not a car, to work. If you're a bill collector, you're out of luck. Just go ahead and sue me if I owe you that much... but, somehow, I don't think you will. You would have done it by now if you had wanted to. If you're selling magazines, I don't read any... ever ! And, if you're from some weird church I've never heard

of, my soul doesn't need saving. I sold it long ago. In fact, it belongs to the construction company I work for."

The wind had whipped up, making a short-lived dust devil dance.

With large, heavy steps, he made his way back to the bulldozer in the far corner of what had once been a tree-covered field. "So, just do us both a favor... give up... okay?" Katashi picked his nose with his dirt-smudged little finger.

Then, he stopped suddenly.

"Money?" He practically hummed the word under his breath. "Well, that's something *different*, isn't it?" Katashi's slightly yellowish teeth peeked out with a smile, thinking of the surprise his gambling buddies would have on Saturday night.

His voice grew chummy. "I see... So, what do you want to know... about Kaiba Seto- *sama* ?" He shrugged boyishly. "Well, that's what you call the man, what can I say? And where do you want me to start?"

This little chat was worth being late for work.

Jounouchi tried to eat. He was sitting up in the bed next to Seto-shoulder to shoulder in a way that made him feel more at ease. These days, the blond didn't know whether he was coming or going or even what he was doing. He'd been in one all white hospital room with the smell of cleaning agents only to be placed in a "newly remodeled" bedroom at the Kaiba Mansion with the smell of new carpet, fresh paint, and oddly perfumed bed linens. Of course, everything at the Kaiba Mansion was beautiful right down to the designer silk pillows and watercolor wall art (which was not to his taste at all). But, nothing here felt like "home."

He frowned at that concept. *What is "home" anyway?* Certainly, it wasn't the run down apartment he'd been living in on the eastern

side of town.

"Something?" Seto said, looking away from his *Financial Times Today* .

Jou shook his head. "I... uh... thought I was hungry. But, I just don't feel like I can keep my jaw moving." He moved a hand to the part of his pajama top where he could feel the thick bandages underneath. "Kinda... sore here... and all... too." Jou looked away when he said it. Admitting pain-weakness-in from of Kaiba Seto seemed so alien to him. A part of his pride was screaming "You dolt!" at him for even bringing the topic up.

Hard blue eyes narrowed at the bowl and, then, up at his face. "Try again. It can't be all bad."

"I'm tellin' ya... that... ," Jou said back and then lost his words as the young man next to him actually dipped a finger into the bowl.

He tasted it. The tip end of a pink tongue licked at the spot. "It's actually..." Blue eyes gave a side glance. "Quite good..."

Jou didn't know what to say. Words escaped him. Had the great duelist, "Kaiba Seto," just... licked a finger? Seriously? The Japanese do not lick fingers! It was revolting. Was he dreaming instead?

The blond guessed that he was until something sweet entered his mouth while his jaw was still hanging down.

"Em?" came his muffled voice as he realized that a small spoonful of the oatmeal had been placed in his mouth-by Kaiba! Smacking his lips and trying to piece some kind of comment together, he was stunned again when the young CEO wiped the back of the spoon on the edge of his nose-leaving a smear of the gooey stuff there, hanging down like snot.

"Ugh! What was that for?" He rubbed his nose roughly with the back of his hand. This was *exactly* the kind of thing that jerk would do to him.

An eyebrow raised at that. "You looked like you were having some kind of brain-fart." He shrugged. "I was just helping you out."

"By wiping oatmeal on my nose?" He frowned deeply and leaned inwardly, which he hoped would be seen as standing up for himself.

Kaiba smirked at him and grabbed the silk collar to the pajama top softly with both hands. "Would you care to name an alternate body part for the oatmeal?"

Jou's eyes widened impossibly and he found it hard to breathe for an entirely new reason other than his bandages being too tight. "I... I... uh... what I mean is..."

Blue eyes. Those eyes were impossibly blue.

Kaiba Seto chuckled to himself softly, taking another boyish swipe at the oatmeal with his index finger. Jounouchi found the sound drawing him in. It was the first time he'd heard it-a short laugh without arrogance or derision. Something between just the two of them. No one else. "Pretty," he breathed before he even realized he'd uttered the word.

"What is?" Seto tilted his head curiously with his finger still touching his lips.

"Hm?"

"What's... *pretty* ?"

Jou picked up the spoon and dug into his bowl with embarrassment flushing his cheeks.

"Nothing." He ate without tasting. That made it easier.

Seto grinned wickedly and picked up a triangle of dry toast. "Answer me or..." He wiggled his eyebrows. "... This toast might wind up in a surprising place, you know. Are you okay with crumbs in your night clothes?" He leaned near Jou's ear and the blond could feel his face prickle in anticipation.

"So, what is... pretty? Hmm?"

Jou shoved a spoonful of oatmeal into his mouth and smacked almost inaudibly, "You are."

"Jounouchi-kun!" Yugi practically cheered the name as he ran into the bedroom with Anzu, Honda, and, what Seto liked to think of as "the guest nameless clinger-on of the week" from school, shuffling in last with her wicker basket full of apples for the recovering patient.

Seto stood in the corner of the bedroom, arms crossed, and a suspicious look crossing his face. His eyes scanned the guests and only when Mokuba bounded into the room in his usual way (which included "Oi, it's great to see ya!" followed by a wave to the group) did the young CEO suddenly find boredom overtaking him. With the Geek Squad, more or less, in attendance, it was time to go. He could feel his lifespan depleting just by being in the same room with them and the incessant, inane chatter.

I've had enough.

Mokuba was asking everyone what they wanted for snacks. Anzu was thrilled with anything. Yugi sat on the edge of the bed and asked Honda for an opinion-would it be lemon cake or sweet bean buns?

The volume rose and Seto tried to slip out of the room but a certain pair of honey colored eyes caught him. "Kaiba, you'll be back... won't 'cha?" He shifted awkwardly in the bed, now wearing new green and white striped PJ's. "I mean, it's Sunday and all... you're not going to work, are ya?" Jou seemed happy that his friends were here but overwhelmed.

And... maybe, something else.

Blue eyes narrowed. Yugi was busy unpacking his backpack and Anzu had a manga collection that she was stacking up on the far nightstand. Honda was just standing there, like the idiot he always appeared to be, with hands in his pockets. *Nothing new.* The girl with the basket of apples had taken a seat in a chair with a knife. Skinning a red apple into a single, long spiral.

New person. Fan girl. *Big deal.*

Knife. Seto's lips turned down. *Not good.*

Something...

Then, she turned her face up to him. There it was again, that same look of adoration that he had been given by Tanaka only seconds before... before...

Before...

Jounouchi had seen it, too, and it made his eyes plead for something he didn't know the name of. The blond found himself shrinking back into the silk pillows, eyes on the dangling red spiral created by the sharp knife.

"Ummm, Jounouchi-kun?" Anzu asked, puzzled as to why her friend seemed so stressed-not that the prideful duelist would ever admit something like that so easily in front of everyone. She scratched the side of her cheek with an index finger. Possibly, just before leaving, she could have a quick word.

The flash of the knife and the wetness of the blade as it sunk into firm flesh meshed into the overall chatter of the room which Jounouchi heard none of.

"Jounouchi-kun?" Anzu repeated, leaning closer. She had Yugi's attention, too, now as the blond didn't respond to her call.

Jou's fingers, which were holding onto the hem of the silk sheets, slowly tightened-knuckles whitening.

Jounouchi is still recovering... in more ways than one .

It was time to step in. Seto sighed openly and walked over to the girl. Gladly, she handed over the knife and the apple she was working on. Inside the basket, there was a lunch plate that she intended to put the pieces on. So, she bent over to retrieve it while her long, black hair fell over to the side like a curtain.

"Jounouchi is afraid," Seto said and saw the blond's head shoot up and shoulders stiffen for a whole new reason. It was always the prelude to a new fight or argument at school and the young CEO easily brushed it off. "As I said, he's afraid..." Then, he held up the apple. "... That I will force him to eat again."

"Eat?" Yugi parroted, not getting it at all. "But, that's Jounouchi-kun's favorite thing!" Everyone knew that.

"Yeah!" Honda agreed, giving an incredulous look between Jou and Kaiba.

"Lately," Seto went on as though he hadn't been interrupted, "he hasn't had much of an appetite. So, making him eat is a priority to getting his strength back."

"It's true," Mokuba confirmed. "I overheard Nii-sama threatening him with toast this morning."

Both Seto and Jou flashed each other guilty looks. Just how much had Mokuba overheard?

"Oh, that's awful!" the girl in the chair said quietly. "I didn't know... or I would not have brought this." She gestured to the basket and then flipped her long, black hair down her back.

Seto smiled indulgently at her and gave a nod of approval. Now, he was certain that she would never come back with food. And, if he was extremely lucky, she'd be too embarrassed to ever step foot in his home ever again.

Jounouchi glanced up at Seto, relief flooding him and said a quick "thank you" with his eyes. His former "tormenter" who, if he seriously thought about it now, really never said or did anything to him that was beyond forgiveness, actually helped him out. He had covered for him and salvaged his pride.

And, when Seto gave him a small, quirked grin as a "you're welcome," Jou knew that his relationship with Seto had changed for the better.

"I'll be back in an hour... so, enjoy your friends," he drawled as he cut the last of the apple-handing over the corkscrewed peeling to Jounouchi. "And, eat that while I'm gone."

"Wha-?" Jou said, sitting up in bed a little.

"It's full of fiber," Seto teased as he went out the door with the knife and bare apple.

"But, K-Kaiba!" The corkscrew peel bounced up and down like a Slinky. "I'm not really hungry."

"Tough," Seto laughed and took a bite out of the delicious, peeled apple right in front of him. "Or, rather, things will be *tough*... if you don't get enough fiber."

Kaiba Seto turned and, going down the hall, he heard Jounouchi growl in frustration at him. Seto grinned to himself, took another juicy bite of apple, and made his way for his home office.

It was going to be a good day.

Author's Note: HAPPY NEW YEAR, EVERYONE!

Chapter 7

Chapter 7

Four days had passed without getting much information on Tanaka or his whereabouts. How the man could stay hidden this well in Domino without help seemed more and more unlikely. And that didn't sit well with the young CEO. True, he had his mansion under armed guard and state of the art security cameras. But, he had to also make it appear to the outside world that he had not stepped up security at all. Nakajima Nagare had given him that advice and it seemed good. It also worked well, and gave ample warning, when the TV reporters came knocking on the front gate asking all kinds of questions as to the reason why Jounouchi Katsuya was recovering in *his* home and not somewhere else.

"How did they find out about that?" Seto demanded of Nakajima over a steaming cup of extra dark coffee in his office. Nakajima stood his ground with Seto as he always did, never backing away. But, the frown settling into his face seemed more than legitimate-saying that it wasn't just a "Seto Kaiba" problem but a "Kaiba-Nakajima" issue that needed to be settled.

"I'll go back to my contacts at the police and see if there's anything they've come up with."

Seto glanced up at him from his desk. "Just the police...?"

The question hung in the air for a moment.

"We do have friends in *low places*... but I leave that sort of thing up to Matsushita and her subordinate *du jour* Matsuto Li." He placed his hands behind his back and clasped them, very pleased with the slight jab.

The two shared knowing smirks. It wasn't beauty but her underworld contacts which made Matsushita Fumi valuable to Kaiba Corp. But, the very thing that made her useful was also a liability. What she didn't know was that she's reached to top of her career at Kaiba Corp and Seto didn't have any intentions of letting her climb any higher. If he had to create a lateral position in Vancouver with no power or authority, he'd do it. The woman really liked the color of his money. So, the CEO didn't think she would cause much of a fuss when the time came to move her.

Kaiba Seto now sat at his desk and was typing another memo until his Blackberry chimed. He picked up his phone and examined the text message.

BORED.

Seto fought down his amusement. So, Mutt finally started playing with the mobile phone he bought him.

DEAL WITH IT.

There was a brief delay before *SO MEAN!* appeared followed by *HELP ME! BOB THE PINK KOI FISH IS TEACHING ME MANNERS & I'M ACTUALLY PAYING ATTENTION!*

Now, Seto was struggling to hold back a grin.

MAYBE, YOU'LL LEARN SOMETHING FROM THE KID'S CHANNEL. I SUGGEST ANIMAL PLANET NEXT, MUTT

A brief pause and Seto was tapping his foot, waiting.

WHEN ARE YOU COMING HOME?

Seto blinked at that message. "Home" was something he thought about occasionally. His mansion was, technically, his home with Mokuba. But, the place felt better, calmer, and warmer with a certain blond haired "mutt" who, just from his bedroom alone, seemed to

make the place worth coming back to. In fact, even today, he was looking forward to simply packing up his things and returning.

" *Knock Knock*," sang Matsushita Fumi at the door. She had dyed her hair with red highlights near her face and she was wearing a navy and white "power suit" (as she liked to think of it) cut with a pencil skirt with a thin, red tie tucked into her black leather belt. Matsushita slinked into the office with a file folder in one hand and her iPhone in the other. "You know, I really should have called before I came over... but your secretary was probably taking a break... like she is right now." She was now next to Seto's desk. "I know what you're thinking... the same as me..." Matsushita leaned lower, near Seto's face. "Good secretaries are hard to find. I know what that's like. I've been through five of them this year."

Seto raised an eyebrow at that and folded his arms across his chest. "Which brings to mind a new idea..." His blue eyes met her brown ones. "Maybe, I should go through all of the directors' files and see who has the largest employee turnover rates. Firing people or having them leave after only a month or two can be draining on a company's finances in terms of training and work hours wasted."

Her smile flickered at that. "Well, yes, Kaiba-sama. We should look into that at a future date. But, of course, with tax season upon us, we might have to think of budgetary issues in the near future."

Seto's eyes narrowed slightly. *Oh, you're good at distractions... almost as good as me. But, not quite.*

Seto's phone chirped again. Another text message.

He picked up the phone while moving his chair to the side so he would have more privacy. He could feel brown eyes straining to see what had been sent.

WOOF! WOOF! LUNCHTIME SOON AND MUTT WANTS A MILKBONE. DON'T MAKE ME EAT APPLESAUCE ALL ON MY OWN. CAN YOU EAT WITH US SO I'LL HAVE REAL FOOD?

"Appetite's back, huh?" Seto's face almost smirked until he noticed, with distain, that Matsushita Fumi had perched her heart-shaped rump on the edge of his desk, her legs crossed seductively. She was so close to him, now, that he could smell her strong, American perfume and the pencil skirt was riding up on her thigh. "Is there anything else I *can do* for you, Kaiba-sama?" She leaned forward, eyes sweeping Seto's handsome face. True, he was younger than she was, but that was just fine. His money more than made up for it, and she knew a few *tricks* that any young man would enjoy no matter where they were together-as long as it was alone.

"I have a lunch date," Seto said standing up abruptly. The chair rolled back as he powered down his laptop.

"B-But... but..." She checked her watch with eyes large and disbelieving. "It's only 10:21!" Didn't businessmen take late lunches?

"Must go," he went on as he reached the door and gestured for her to exit out of it. There was something about her today-more flirtatious than usual-and he didn't feel right about leaving her where she was, next to his locked desk. Did she know that Nakajima Nagare had been in to see him? Probably. Did she want to know what was said? Most likely. Would he take advantage of that?

Oh, yes.

"By the way," Seto stated evenly as she passed through the threshold, "did Nakajima explain to you about that *request* for you... to meet up with your... *friends*?" Yes, he'd phrase it like that.

She swung her hips seductively as she turned back to face him. Seto could tell she didn't like it but that she'd do it anyway.

Friends in low places...

"Actually, they're friends of my older brother's from long... long ago." She tucked a reddish strand of hair behind her ear, trying to look demure. "But, of course, I'd do anything for you... Kaiba-sama." She

practically purred his name and Seto flatly ignored it. He glanced down at his Blackberry instead.

Chime.

Chime.

"From someone... *special* ?" she hinted with a touch of envy reaching her eyes. Seto saw it and smiled thinly.

"V-e-r-y," the young CEO said like rich velvet and made his way for his private elevator, passing by his secretary's desk with a curt "I'll be back around one. Let no one into my office... as usual."

The middle aged secretary humphed an "okay" with a "corner-of-the-eye" glare towards the sexy slut-ette who had managed to sneak by when she was taking a well-deserved bathroom break. After all, secretaries have bladders, too!

Matsushita Fumi didn't look embarrassed, as the secretary had hoped she would, but frustrated-which was all the better. Matsushita turned on her red, five inch stiletto heel and clomped off. She needed some caffeine and would get some in the cafeteria on the first floor in whatever form she could find.

"Do you know how hard it is to tie bandages on a patient who is busy texting?" Kudo complained with emphasis in his tone. All of the squirming and wiggling was one thing but Jou was working the keys and only raising his arms high enough to help get the job done when prodded at least three times.

"Oh... uh... sorry." He placed a hand behind his blond head.

"So?" Kudo asked, cutting another piece of medical tape while calculating where to put it.

"So, uh...?" Jou was lost.

"So, is he coming for lunch or not?" Kudo stood back to admire his work, his well toned muscular arms flexing and hands on his hips.

Chime.

Chime.

Chime.

Jou almost dropped the phone, juggling it for a moment until he steadied himself and read the words ON MY WAY; WILL PUT LAPTOP IN HOME OFFICE & JOIN YOU.

"He's coming!" Jou cheered and Kudo smiled at that enthusiasm. He remembered when his wife, back then-the mysterious and sexy half Japanese-half Korean girl at the Mr. Doughnuts shop, had said "yes" to going out to the movies with him. If Kudo remembered right, he did a little victory dance in front of all the other customers at the store. It was so embarrassing that she almost called off the date.

"Fine, then," Kudo said, "I'll tell the cook. And we'll switch the menu to onion soup, sourdough bread, and mild cheese."

Jou nodded and watched Kudo leave. For a moment, just a moment, he admired his nurse's well-built form and then looked down at himself in comparison. Actually, there was no comparison. Kudo was older, true, but he must also work out. He had strong biceps which stood out and, Jou could guess, a toned six pack, too. Jounouchi wondered, briefly, if anyone would be attracted to his own slightly narrowed shoulders and lithe body. It wasn't your typical Japanese form, being taller and with longer draping arms.

But, anyway...

Images of Seto flashed through his mind like still photographs. Kaiba Seto could have anyone he wanted. He was sexy to the extreme with perfect skin and a brainy nature. He had a mansion, more

money than anyone could spend in a lifetime, and had traveled to foreign countries-speaking the native languages with ease.

Jou thought about himself. The most he'd done was travel with Yugi and the gang (and borrowed money from Anzu to do it. In fact, he would probably be paying Anzu back until the day he died.) Then, his mind flashed to the tournament. He almost died that day. Blood. Cards sprayed and soaked in red. It had just been one bullet, but that one had almost been enough. There had been complications, too, in the hospital. But the doctors and staff seemed to deemphasize it when speaking to him-as though they'd traumatize him more by telling the whole truth.

Jounouchi hated lies-whether they were told outright or by omission.

But, now that he thought about it, maybe he was doing that very thing. No matter how many times he smiled or changed the direction of a conversation to avoid painful topics, Jou knew that he was feeling *different* . It wasn't just physical.

The image came back to him. He could see the scene, the smile Tanaka had given Kaiba, the gun raised, and the ending result.

You can't outrun a bullet.

Jounouchi tussled his own hair in frustration. *And, now, just look at me. I've got scars from what that bum did to me. And scars from the doctors trying to save me.*

His honey colored eyes welled with tears.

I'll never look the same with my shirt off. I'm... ugly... now. He made a fist tightly, head dropped. Some part of me wants to go back to normal... to the way it was before all this happened and the stupid tournament. When I was stronger. I'm safe now, maybe, but that doesn't mean that I feel okay... not like before.

Why can't I be like I was before?

He shook his head miserably. He'd been trying to push away these depressing thoughts. But they always came to him when he was alone.

The image of the CEO came back.

What I want is... and I can't believe I'm thinking this... I want Kaiba. Right now, I want him. And, I know... we've changed, the two of us.

He stood from the bed, easing himself up gently. Those bandages were a tad snug and he was still really, really sore.

"I don't think it's out of pity," Jou said to himself. "Kaibas don't feel pity... not even Mokuba."

He made his way to the door, a hand on his slightly aching back. He'd been in that bed too long.

"But if this... whatever it is that's happening between us... stays... Then, I want to get stronger, better. I want to pull my own weight and do as much as I can on my own to show that I don't need protection forever. I need to stand on my own two feet."

Lethargically, Jounouchi lumbered down the hall in search of Seto's office. It would be a nice surprise to find him already there and waiting for a certain CEO-a step towards "normal," a step towards "healthy." Proof that he could make it around the house on his own.

It's impossible to move forward if you're chained to the past. I refuse to let Tanaka have that power. He will not chain me to a painful past.

He chuckled lightly to himself at the thought.

I want a happy future... with someone... someday.

The house was much larger on the inside than Jounouchi had remembered. Though, the few times he had been in the place, he

had been so defensive about the "Great Kaiba Seto" that he hadn't paid much attention other than how much everything cost and the grand expense put into the place not to mention all of the servants in formal black and white uniforms. What had been missing from the whole scene, he decided, was the presence of a Golden Lab by the name of "Catherine" or some such over the top name. Didn't all rich people have fancy dogs with fancy names?

Then, he remembered his own name, "Mutt."

"Poor Kaiba," Jou sighed, peeking into a room that seemed to be a music room with a baby grand piano dominating, "his only dog is a mutt."

Servants, seemingly far too busy for words, slipped past before pajama-clad Jou could ask for directions. Maybe, he'd run into his nurse. That would make things much easier.

On a hunch, Jounouchi took another hallway and kept going.

"You know, it would be great to have a map... or a place to sit." He stumbled across French doors half covered by fancy lace sheers. He unlocked them and gave them a soft push. "I'm really getting... Oh, wow! A pool!"

Obviously, he had made it to the back of the house where a pool, three times the size of the one at school, beckoned him to walk forward. The sun was shining high in the sky and the ripples on the water winked at him brightly.

He shaded his eyes, wishing for sunglasses. "How great is this?!"

It felt so good to have the breeze on his face and the warmth of "outside" after being cooped up indoors for so long. There was something sensual about it, too-a ribbon-like breeze followed by the radiating heat.

"But I'm still a little tired," Jou commented as he took a lounge chair by the pool. His body fit the gently curving chair perfectly and he draped an arm across his eyes. The light was a tad bright now.

Yes, too bright.

He shut his eyes, only for a moment-or, so, he told himself.

"Just what the doctor ordered," he sighed happily, "... a chance to sit in the sun. But, in a minute, I gotta go find that loud mouth's office." He quirked a grin. "Won't Kaiba be surprised ta see me?"

A face peered in.

"Oh, look what I see..." Tanaka Yuuta, in a delivery uniform, stood on his toes as he pressed his face between the iron bars of the fence. "It's just as the note said... he really is staying here." Tanaka's voice grew lower and more venomous with each word. Now, the man regretted not putting more than one bullet into the "loser" who had caused his god so much trouble. What he couldn't figure out was why Jounouchi Katsuya was staying at the Kaiba Mansion, sunning himself by the pool. And how did he manage to recover so quickly, anyway?

It made him seethe.

Another few days. That's all he had to do. Tanaka patted his chest where he'd stashed all he needed for his "visit" in a few days. The map was the most helpful of all and, after staying another night in the local homeless shelter, he quickly made his way to the place where he'd been left this uniform and pizza to deliver. Of course, he was really supposed to case the house. But, he figured, it wasn't a bad cover to be handed and, later, he could eat the pizza after picking off the green peppers.

But, now, with Jounouchi Katsuya so close, the temptation to strike was so tempting. All he would have to do was...

"Oi! What you doing there?" shouted a voice from behind and Tanaka froze. It was one of Kaiba's men in black with dark sunglasses.

"Where, the hell, is the entrance to this place?" Tanaka fussed, tugging the cap over his eyes.

"Eh?" the man said and then spoke into his Motorola Smartphone "C-5 checking in, I've got a live one here trying to deliver what appears to be an extra large pizza."

"Hell, yeah," Tanaka fumed, "and all I got was the crummy address... Ya know, this pizza's already paid for. I could have just taken off with it and nobody'd know except the idiot who didn't give me more than a name."

"And that would be?" the man said, somewhat disbelieving.

"For Katsuya Jounouchi from..." Okay, he had to think quickly. Then, he remembered hanging around an electronics store in one of the shopping centers. "A gift from FM Radio 79.9, The Eagle."

"Oh, those idiot reporters from earlier," the muscle man cursed and knocked the pizza box out of Tanaka's hands, spinning it onto the ground. A little dust cloud rose up. "We told them to go away and we had no comment. You hear me?"

The pizza box was still on the ground and, now, covered in dirt. Tanaka simply stared at it with hands on his hips. "Well, this is the address. And I did my part by showing up and trying to deliver it." He gestured to the food.

"Yeah," the man gruffed.

Tanaka held his hand out. "That pizza was paid for, but I still didn't get any tip."

The man in black's face melted into a scowl. "Get outta here, ya bum! Go!"

Tanaka stormed off. He threw "Idiot! See if we ever deliver here again!" over his shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah," the tall Japanese man retorted, "go kiss my ass."

" *Where is he?!* " Seto demanded hotly to an empty room. The bed had been freshly made by a passing servant who had even gone so far as to put a dark chocolate on the pillow-which Jou always treasured-but there was no sign of the blond anywhere. The bathroom door was open ajar, too.

Nothing.

Kudo came bustling behind Seto with a tray and two steaming bowls of soup, bread, cheese and butter. He stopped abruptly when he overheard Seto, put two and two together, and realized that his patient had disappeared without his knowledge. "Kaiba-sama, I told him that I was stepping out to get the meal. I have no idea where he could have-" But that was all that he could get out before Seto went power walking past him with a look of pure fury.

"Mutt's gone AWOL and I'm going to have his ass on a platter if this turns out to be a bigger deal than it already is!"

Kudo put the tray down on the nightstand and scratched his head a little, confused but still a bit worried nonetheless. "Okay, now that sentence made no sense to me at all."

Seto stormed through the halls, getting startled looks from the servants. Most had the common sense to disappear into rooms that "needed their attentions right this minute." Others did their best to carry on with their assigned tasks with heads down.

Seto came across his head butler and asked curtly, "Have you seen him?" which was all that was necessary. The only "him" of importance besides Mokuba, who would be at school until 3:45, was their "guest," Jounouchi. The well dressed butler shook his grey head "no" and explained that he'd been supervising the rooms at the front of the house so far.

"Then, he must have wandered off to the back," Seto deduced and made his way in that direction with a feeling of something akin to "annoyance" mixed with "dread." His heart was thumping hard. He didn't like not knowing where Jounouchi was. He hated himself for over reacting but couldn't make his body obey him. It was acting totally on instinct-the same way it always did when Mokuba was in trouble.

"Damn it! This is *Mutt*, we're talking about," Seto cursed to himself. "Why am I like this? When I don't need...?" He stomped through another room. "But DAMN IT!" He wanted to rip his hair out in frustration. He was furious with Jounouchi, with the situation, and himself. But nothing would be better... would be okay... until Jou was found. That part he did understand. And that part, at the very least, he accepted.

Yes, the situation would be rectified at once if he had anything to say about it. And he did.

He passed by the windows looking out upon the pool and... he stopped.

"So, that's where he is," Seto spat angrily and made his way to the ornate doors leading to the Olympic sized pool.

The flood of emotions returned: Relief. Irritation. Anger. Resentment. Relief again. Was it possible to want to hug and murder the same person at once?

"Damn it, Jounouchi!" Seto bellowed following a deep breath of air, making the blond jump painfully with a hand to his fresh bandages

(and all undercover agents in the surrounding area found themselves scrambling for cover to escape a thoroughly pissed-off Kaiba).

"Wha-?" He blinked up with wide, honey eyes at Kaiba Seto looming over him, making a good sun break with the exception of the acid looking face peering down. Jou tried to recoil in the lounge chair. It was only natural.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Seto seethed. "I thought we were going to have lunch together. But, instead... instead..." He actually began pacing, still furious and trying to keep his thoughts together. "And... And, to make matters worse, of all places to end up, you decide to go *outside* ." He gave in incredulous look. "Outside!" He gestured to the ornate scenery with finely sculpted shrubs. "Do you know how vulnerable you are out here in the open? That crazy Tanaka could be anywhere!"

Jou hung his head slightly. "I know... Y-You're right... But, it's just that... Well, your people keep a pretty good eye on me and I know that I'm safe here. You've got top notch security and all."

Somewhere inside the Kaiba Mansion, the staff members who were working the hidden bugs and microphones around the perimeter of the house gave each other a "thumbs up."

The security was state of the art. There was no debating that issue. Jou was right for once but it didn't set well with him. Jounouchi, by nature, was faithful, kind, and understanding. But, he could also be brash, impulsive, and self-sacrificing. On the other hand, Tanaka was clever, a planner, and had that hideously disconcerting "fan girl glow." From living with Gozaburo, Seto knew full well that criminally insane people had the will and tenacity to get results if they so desired. And Tanaka seemed determined to rid Domino of a certain blond duelist.

"Inside," Kaiba growled, offering a hand to the blond who, in turn, gladly took it. Once up, though, he let go of the hand-uncomfortable at the thought that someone might see them. Sure, they'd held

hands several times. But, what if Kaiba wanted his privacy from the servants?

"Sorry," Jou said as he entered the house. He really needed to think of a better apology than that.

Something was up.

Kaiba rolled his eyes. "What now?" he huffed, feeling his heartbeat returning to normal. "Was I really so mean to you this time?" He ran a hand through his hair. The wind had kicked it in his face with the last gust.

The blond still seemed sullen.

"We were all very concerned about your sudden disappearance." Maybe, he was now only justifying his anger-maybe. And why he suddenly felt compelled to make "nice-nice" when he had no real practice at it, he couldn't even begin to understand.

"Well, it's... um..." Jou rubbed his nose distractedly.

Seto huffed a sigh. "You can't fool me, Jounouchi. You look just like you always do when you lose to me at Duel Monsters."

Okay, that one earned him a nasty look. And, admittedly, he deserved it.

"Well?" Seto stopped in his tracks, eyebrow arched.

"You're going to think it's stupid."

"Try me."

Jounouchi shrugged awkwardly. "Before I fell asleep by the pool... what I was really trying to do was to find your office so that I could meet you there." In a sarcastic tone, he said, "But I screwed that up... big surprise."

Seto folded his arms and cocked his chestnut head to the side. "Do you know where my home office is?"

"No." He shook his head.

"Did you bother to ask any of the servants?"

"Um... well..."

Seto sighed again. "I'll take that as a 'no' as well."

Jounouchi really did look defeated and the color was starting to drain out of him. *He's been on his feet too long... even with that nap in the sun.* "Then, we'll go there when you're feeling better. For now, though, we have a lunch waiting for us in your room." He took Jou's hand, much to the blond's surprise, and shifted it around himself-in essence, draping Jounouchi's long arm over his shoulders. Then, he grabbed the blond's wrist, keeping the arm in place. Jou felt his face flush when Seto's free hand settled on his thin, pajama-clad hip.

"Time to go back."

"Kaiba... I... uh..." He could feel his face flush at the large hand's warm contact and Seto noticed the change with a bit of concern.

"If you feel like you're going to faint, hold onto me first," he instructed. "I'll carry you back to your room like a bride, if need be."

At that, Jou's jaw dropped. "I can't believe you just said that!" he hissed lowly. The blond glanced around nervously for the servants. But they were alone.

"Well, I did." There was the trademark Kaiba smirk which said, "And I'm not taking it back, either."

The blond straightened his shoulders, taking up the challenge. "Show the way. We're eating lunch together and I am not... *AM NOT*... going to faint like a wuss."

Seto smirked to himself, showing the twisting path to the front of the house. The casual hand at Jou's hip stayed in place and the blond had to fight with himself to ignore it.

"Well, you'd be out cold, you see..." the CEO went on, thinking out loud. "I could do anything that I want with you."

"W-WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?" Jou's face flushed as morally bent pictures from a doujinshi that he'd bought last month-called "Weekend at Bernita's"-popped in his mind. True, it had an all girl cast, but still!

"I could use you as a door stop, a coat rack, bathroom rug..."

"WHAT?!" That wasn't sexy at all! Not even remotely hentai.

"Need I repeat myself?" Pearly white teeth flashed at him.

"Hell, no! Let's go eat something." He stomped off like a truck driver with the CEO in tow.

"Not that way, Jounouchi. Take a left from here."

"Humph!"

"What was that? I don't speak 'caveman'."

"I said 'humph' and I meant 'humph'... ya know! Everybody understands that!"

Sometimes, Jou was a joy to tease.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8

"Well, well, well," the male nurse murmured with hands on hips, "the patient returns." Openly, he eyed Jou for any worrying signs as the sheepish young man entered the room with an arm draped around Kaiba Seto's shoulders. The seemingly boyish, fraternal affection wasn't lost on him and he turned back to the still cooling soup to hide his smile.

"Sorry about that," Jou said. It wasn't his intention to worry anyone. And he hated the fact that he did.

"Everything seems to be in order here, so..." Kudo turned back in a casual way to regard the couple again before making his way to the door.

Jounouchi seemed more than well looked after even though his unscheduled jaunt around the mansion had caused trouble for everyone. Apparently, Kaiba-sama was going to handle things his way and, by the looks of it, Jounouchi was going to go along with it with a tad of embarrassment.

That would teach him a lesson.

The young CEO pulled back the covers and made a gesture towards the bed with the command "sit."

"Not a dog," Jou grumbled but sat down anyway with fatigue in his bones. It felt good to be back in a comfortable place. His face relaxed almost instantly, head drooped forward towards his chest. There was no point in hiding it when he knew that Seto was practically analyzing him. So, he just went with the feeling.

Kaiba gave a satisfied, sidelong glance and then turned back to the nurse. "Agreed... all in order," he said somewhat curtly which got another frown from Jou.

"Be nice to him," the blond muttered and Kudo smiled pleasantly as he strolled out of the room.

But the voices continued:

"I was."

"Was *not* ."

"Don't raise your voice."

"I didn't. I just said..."

"You're talking when you should be eating. Where's the spoons?"

"On the tray. You're going to be eating with me, right? I've been waiting on you."

"Waiting? You were roaming."

"I'm not a blasted cell phone!"

"Well, the next time you get lost in the house, use a cell phone."

"Does it have GPS? 'Cause I'll need it!"

Kudo chuckled as he walked down the hallway. This "playtime" and the paycheck made the job worthwhile.

"Oi, kid."

Kaiba Mokuba was walking along the path to where the limo would be waiting for him. This was a half day at school and, admittedly, he was excited about leaving school early to go to the arcade and, then,

to home to play with Jounouchi. He'd been a lot less lonely since the blond had moved in with them. And, he'd even looked for excuses to call and chat on the phone-nothing big, really, just talking the way friends often did.

Mokuba turned slightly to see a man wearing a delivery uniform and carrying a pizza box. The boy folded his arms defensively and glared as the man approached.

The limo driver, also suspicious, pulled out his cell phone. If necessary, he had many numbers on speed dial and this stranger wouldn't like any of them.

"You can't fool me," the raven haired child said, standing his ground.

"What? I hadn't said anything." But Tanaka pulled his baseball cap with the pizza logo on it further over his eyes, pretending to tip his cap and bow at the same time.

"You're not a pizza delivery guy and I didn't order anything." His eyes blazed in much the way his older brother's could when firing someone stupid. "So, don't think that just because I'm a kid, I'm someone you can walk on."

"No, it's nothing like that." Tanaka smiled wanly. *Actually, it's exactly like that* . But, then he smiled a real smile. His hero, Kaiba Seto, must be an excellent parent-teaching his little brother to fend for himself and beware of strangers. With all of the pressures of social climbers clinging to them, they must be constantly on the lookout for people who cause trouble. But a spark of envy reached Tanaka, too. Here, standing before him, was someone special, someone who was precious to his hero, his kami. This child was more important to Kaiba Seto than money and that made Mokuba a living treasure.

After this was all finished and he had gotten an explanation from Kaiba himself about why Jounouchi was staying in his home, Tanaka would join the brothers and stand by their side as a loyal comrade.

That was the future he was fighting for now thanks to his benefactor-a person who seemed to know which homeless shelter he was staying in and how to drop little notes.

"Oi, you!" Mokuba shouted, losing patience quickly. "Just knock it off and go back to where you came from." The man who was spacing out before him was getting on his nerves. The smile-what he could see of it-was bent, creepy.

"No, really... I've got this pizza and..."

Mokuba took a step backwards, toward the limo. "Didn't I already tell you that I know you're not a real pizza delivery guy?" He tossed his head proudly, black mane in the air briefly. "Look, you don't walk like one. You're too pushy." Then, he pointed to the uniform. "The Happy Pizza Company changed their uniforms two months ago. They don't wear those anymore."

Tanaka paled.

"So, look... I know you're a reporter and everything... probably for some rag mag," Mokuba said over his shoulder, "but I'm not telling you who my brother is dating, what he eats for breakfast, or what soap he uses in the shower."

"S-Soap?" The pizza box shook in his hands. He felt breathless at the thought of knowing that golden bit of information-something that nobody else outside of the Kaiba Mansion knew. And, if he could just get the black haired child to steal a bar of that soap and deliver it... And what if it had a few chest hairs?

"Yes! I knew it!" Mokuba was quite proud of himself as he got to the limo where the driver had the door open and was waiting on him. The child did a little, wiggly victory dance as he got inside.

The white gloved limo driver walked around the car, giving a death glare to Tanaka as he did so, but the man's mind was on other things-specifically, now, his failure. What he really wanted was more

details before his *visit* to the Kaiba Mansion. The more information, the better off he'd be.

As the car slowly rolled away, Tanaka pulled out the latest note he'd received from his generous benefactor-the same person, he assumed, who'd left clothes for him previously.

12:30 PM

GET INFO FROM MOKUBA

SCHOOL ADDRESS IS...

Well, he had planned on the child being more innocent and willing to leave the school with him under some kind of pretence. What he wanted was to pull the old "I'm trying to deliver a pizza but I can't find the address. Can you help me?" Children, he knew, were always eager to help. But Kaiba Mokuba seemed much older, far beyond his years. So, this plan on taking the child with him and pumping him for information didn't work.

Tanaka was certain that Kaiba would be angry at first. But, later, he'd understand him bringing Mokuba to a safe place. After all, they were just going to talk and everything was being done for Kaiba-sama's benefit in the long run. No harm there. Even Mokuba would be won over once Kaiba was pleased with him. Maybe, he'd even make him one of his men in black. That would be such a great reward for all he'd done!

Looking left and right to make sure he hadn't attracted the police, Tanaka stepped onto the crosswalk and made his way for an upscale housing development. Surely, there would be a dumpster there where he could ditch the pizza box once he was finished eating.

"Oh, that was so good!" The blond put the silver spoon down in the antique porcelain bowl a little too roughly and it circled once around the rim before coming to a complete, clattering stop.

Blue eyes widened slightly. "Do you have any idea how much that china costs?" Seto drawled from his seated place next to Jounouchi. He'd finished his meal long ago-mostly taking a bite here and there. Soup, no matter the type or flavor, was never high on his list of favorites. "Here," he offered.

The half eaten bowl was, now, being finished up by Jounouchi with his own spoon. Seto wondered, briefly, if that counted as an indirect kiss.

The wet slurp that followed made him turn his head away with a sigh and the words, "kill the mood."

"Wha-?"

"It's nothing."

"Sorry," Jou mumbled through another slice of buttered bread in his mouth. "I'll try," he munched, "to be a better mutt for you." He brushed the crumbs off of this chest and onto the tray-some flicking into his own empty bowl.

"Well, at least you're eating."

The blond cocked his head to the side. "Worried?"

Wasn't it obvious? Seto rolled his eyes as an answer. But, then, he turned his gaze away. Actually, more than just "away." His vision was boring a hole through the opposite wall. And it was quiet. For the first time, the silence between them became unsettling for Seto. "What are we doing?" he asked quietly.

"Finishing lunch," Jounouchi smacked innocently, not catching on to the question.

"I don't mean *that* ." He made a pointed gesture to the food tray. "I mean... *this*..." He picked up Jou's free hand and easily laced fingers with it.

In his mind, he knew the hand holding and affection was natural.

The blond put down his piece of half-eaten bread which looked like a buttered, waxing moon. The friendly smile drained from him as he searched for an honest explanation, a solution that would satisfy them both.

"I... don't know." The blond chuckled but there was no mirth in it. "I wish I had an answer for you... and for me. It would be easier if I could, but..."

He couldn't finish.

A flash.

A bridge.

Cherry blossoms falling.

White with gold dragonflies.

Seto hummed an agreement. Their "companionship," and that's what he told himself that it was, didn't make any sense considering their history together. "Agreed," he said, "but it seems to me that we are better... *stronger*... like this than when we are..."

"On our own?" Jou ventured.

He got a shrug of acceptance followed by "yes."

Jounouchi leaned his blond head against Seto's shoulder with the knowledge in his heart that it would not be rejected. "We're so different, though. And neither one of us has... well... a good history, a good home life." He shut his honey colored eyes and added, "The cards are stacked against us no matter who we choose to be with."

Seto gave a sharp, sideways glance to Jou. If that was how he saw things, he wasn't going to question it. And, maybe, on some level, he could understand the logic behind it. But it was impossible to move

forward if one was chained to the past. Jounouchi needed to learn that, too. But, he was a hands-on, "learning by doing" personality. And he had to literally smack into a wall before he knew it was there.

Jounouchi's head was still leaning into his shoulder and his eyes were closed tightly. The glimmer of a tear shined under one eye.

Seto sighed impatiently, found a strand of blond hair and tucked it behind his ear.

"Don't dwell on it too much," Seto said, "and borrow trouble in the process."

Jou turned his chin up and glanced at him before rubbing his eye in a way he hoped seemed normal, not rubbing away a tear at all.

The tray shifted, clattering the china.

"You're comfortable and you're safe," Seto assured, taking his hand back. He picked up the tray. It was too awkward to put it on Jou's side. *I'll have to place it on the nightstand on my side of the bed.*

His eyes widened.

My side? he thought. *Since when have I ever had a 'my side of the bed'? I've always slept alone.*

"Something?" Jou said, worried "Are you okay?"

Seto took a breath and let it out very slowly, thinking things through before pulling out his cell phone. Yes, he needed to do that.

Blip.

Chirp.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

"Kaiba?" Jou said the name with that tone of concern again that made Seto deeply annoyed. But, for the blond's sake, he decided to let it go.

"I'm just tired," he explained vaguely as his fingers danced over the keys. And he was tired. It was no lie. Everything he'd gone through—from Jou's sudden disappearance, to eating food he barely liked, to calming down a worried Jou who couldn't even begin to fathom what they were becoming, what they were starting to mean to each other by remaining together. *Enough* .

The young CEO pushed "send" and then remembered something. "Oh, and this," Seto said. He pulled out a deck of cards from the inside pocket of his dress coat. Jou's eyes widened as Seto handed him a new stack of Duel Monster Cards. More than half were holos, shining brightly.

"Time Wizard! Penguin Soldier! Rise of Destiny!" His face glowed with excitement, heart beating happily. It was an unbelievable deck. "This is amazing!" he breathed as he fanned the cards out.

"Your other cards were... *ruined*... and it was my tournament... so..." The young CEO didn't bother to finish the sentence. In truth, he didn't want Jou to ask too many questions. One of his security guards had filed a report stating that Jou's Duel Monster cards had been so drenched in blood and, later, dried into a single heap that the cleaning crew had to use a putty knife to scrape up the lumped and stuck on remains.

Jou's face blanked at the mention of the tournament. He could see Tanaka again—white, faux Kaiba Corp trench with a black shirt and black jeans underneath—aiming the gun. Nothing could stop him, no one. That expression, fanatical and determined. Jou seemed to remember a fang hanging out of his mouth. Maybe.

The gun.

Aimed.

Fired.

Fire-the wound was pure fire and his body was a fountain of blood.

Suddenly fighting for breath, Jou tried to push the feelings away which followed.

His chest rose and fell roughly. "You don't... have to keep doing things for me just because it was your tournament." The blond dropped the cards into his lap, but continued to stare at them. He was considering giving the deck back. And, maybe, it was time for him to leave, too. Maybe Tanaka had decided to skip town rather than face the authorities. No one had heard from him in awhile.

"It's done and you can't turn these over to me," Seto said stubbornly. He had watched Jou's eyes and sensed something was wrong-something he wasn't saying. So, he took the hand next to him possessively and held it.

The blond gave a sad, uncertain smile. "Seriously?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I said so, didn't I?" He leaned in slightly. "Never question a Kaiba."

Jou chuckled, took his hand back, and went through the cards again-thumbing through them the way all pros did.

It made him feel better, watching the duelist in Jou kick in just by touching the cards.

"I'm quite intrigued by this card," Seto mentioned as he pointed to a special card called "Red Eyes Darkness Metal Dragon" which was a cybernetic, metal-coated version of the Red Eyes Dragon. But this one could special summon one dragon from the player's graveyard at every turn.

"It's cool," Jou agreed, giving it closer inspection.

Seto took Jou's hand again and laced fingers. "I wanted something better... something with armor as a symbol... as protection for you... for the future."

The blond pushed his shoulders back. "I'm not that delicate. I won't break," Jou protested, but it was all bluster and the young CEO knew it. "I'm a *guy* after all." He thumped his chest in caveman fashion.

Seto smiled at him and loftily agreed. "Well, you are something."

The light switch was flicked off and the room dimmed to a dull grey. Kaiba Seto kicked his brown leather Italian shoes off by the door. He was sure that his e-mail to his secretary had been received by now. He'd called off his meeting with the Kaiba Corp Board of Directors. Yes, it was last minute of sorts-being scheduled to take place three hours from now. Seto sited "not feeling well" as his excuse. But, it was Jou who was not feeling well, not himself. But he could have cared less. He hadn't called in sick in over two years. And it was time to take some sick leave.

Seto stretched, arms over his head. He was tired and tight between his shoulders.

"What cha doing?" Jounouchi asked, curious now as he slid the little drawer shut. He'd just placed his new deck in the desk drawer next to him. He'd play with it later against Mokuba while Seto was at work. It would keep him busy and distracted instead of missing the chestnut haired CEO.

Seto didn't answer right away. He ran his fingers against the soft material of his shirt. This was the reason why he bought it-the feel against his skin. While New York designers had their place in his life, sometimes he felt that Italian designers could do things better. And this shirt was proof.

The lightly brushed white cotton blend shirt with long, barrel sleeves opened button by button.

Skin at the neck and dip of the throat peeked out, promising perfection in the male form.

At first, it was perfectly innocent until Seto noticed Jounouchi swallowing thickly and his honey colored eyes never leaving the mother of pearl buttons on the shirt.

Seto tried to question him with his eyes-which would have been fun, but he couldn't seem to draw the blond's attention upwards.

Jou could feel a blush as he watched the row of buttons pop open one by one, but couldn't seem to draw his eyes away.

Another button.

Another.

Down.

The shirt peeled back to reveal a designer, white undershirt made of a thin mesh-like material, sleeveless and tight fitting.

It's so sheer, Jou thought and then fretted-wondering if he'd said that out loud or not.

The CEO draped the dress shirt over a chair, padded to bed, and pulled back the covers, much to Jou's surprise. He muttered a "Sleep is what's called for" before joining Jounouchi in the bed, uninvited.

The blond blinked, feeling slightly nervous. Seto looked so good... *too appealing*... in what he was still wearing. Then, without thinking, he asked, "You keep sleeping in your jeans and slacks... That can't be comfortable." Yes, he was thinking out loud because he hated sleeping in anything other than pajama bottoms. But, now that he thought about it, he was actually *INVITING* Seto to take off what he was wearing. And that wasn't what he had planned at all!

"It's not like I care or anything but..." Seto rolled over onto his back with a dark smile. "Was that a hint for me to go sans trousers?"

" Eh-h-h-h??! " Jou's heart skipped a beat . I knew he would think that! How do I get myself out of this one now?

Then, the trademark Seto smirk crossed his face with his grip on the sheets-pulling them over onto his shoulder.

A chestnut colored eyebrow wiggled impishly.

"I... I mean... I... uh..." Jounouchi could feel his stomach muscles tighten and his chest tensed up, too. With a grimace, he placed a hand over his bandages. There was pain, now, pulling and burning him.

Seto noticed it and decided to drop the little game. Jounouchi was so uptight right now. For years, he'd known the blond was the jumpy sort. But, when push came to shove, he always found a way to rise above it. And there would be determination in his eyes, shadowy and sensuous. Unfortunately, the way the blond looked now came across as uncertain and weak-not appealing in the slightest.

"I'm tired," Seto sighed, "and I e-mailed my secretary to cancel all of my meetings today. So, if you don't mind, I'm going to catch a nap." He rolled over onto his side, facing the blond, and shutting his eyes.

"Oh... I see..." Jou laughed nervously to himself as he sunk down into the covers, too. "I'm sorry... I just kind of..."

One blue eye opened and regarded him testily. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Yeah, right." Jou nodded, feeling foolish now.

"Just be quiet and close your eyes."

There was a brief pause and then Jou said, "Yeah."

Seto sighed heavily and hoped that the blond would quiet down, too, until he heard. "I'll do just that. It's no problem."

Now, both blue eyes were open and narrowed in his direction. "Didn't I just say...?"

"Yeah," Jou responded and then mentally kicked himself. Couldn't he say anything other than "yeah"? In fact, he shouldn't be saying anything at all. They were trying to sleep for goodness sake.

Sleep! Just sleep!

" *That's it,*" Seto growled.

Jou raised a hand defensively. "I know! I know! I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I'm sorry..."

He really didn't mean to. It was that mouth of his. It didn't know when to quit. It always got him into the worst trouble at school and at home when his father bothered to come home.

"I'm putting an end to this."

"Eh?" Honey colored eyes widened in alarm. Those were words that Jounouchi had feared but had pushed to the back of his mind ever since he woke up in the hospital and sensed his growing relationship with Kaiba. *Alone* . In much the same way it was when his father would leave-that businesslike way he always had about him as he walked out the door with his lone bag of belongings and a cigarette between his teeth. No matter how much Jou tried to delay him, the man always left in the end-supposedly to work manual labor jobs to bring in money. But, whether he sent money home or not, Jounouchi would always end up with an empty house. His gang banger days in junior high were supposed to harden him to the feelings, but they never truly did.

Jounouchi had a heart, as Yugi was constantly telling him. But Jou always wondered if that was a good thing.

It was now, he realized, that he had grown fond of and dependent on a certain classmate and CEO as more than just a "friend." Yes, it was definitely more than that. And something cold ran through him at the thought of being turned away so easily and over something so trivial.

But if Kaiba didn't want him, he wouldn't beg. He never did with his father, either.

"This way," Seto growled. Strong arms wrapped around Jou's waist, reeling him in. The blond's bodily slid easily across the white silk sheets and against Kaiba Seto's body where Jou was held fast but not too tightly. Jounouchi's breath hitched as Seto flung one bare arm across his chest and slid the other behind his neck, supporting his blond head like a pillow. The rest of Seto's body was pressed firmly against Jounouchi's hip and side with a leg draped over one of Jou's.

"So, go to sleep."

Breathing, Jou thought with his heart drumming in his chest, *breathing would be good right now. Gotta remember that. And sleep... sleep's good, too.*

Lying there and held possessively, Jounouchi could only squeak out an "okay" with a tomato red face while Seto napped peacefully by his side.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9

With a half-eaten salted pretzel dangling out of his mouth, Jounouchi answered his phone with a muffled "Hello?"

"Son! How are you doing?"

Honey colored eyes widened with realization and the pretzel fell thoughtlessly into his lap. "D-Dad?" He couldn't believe it. Him? "Ummm... I... uh.... How'd you get this number?"

He didn't want to come across as rude, but still...

There was a brief, barking laugh in the background followed by "I just called the number that Kaiba-sama used when he contacted me in the first place." He hummed a little, pleased with himself. "A nice bit of information, that. And, a few minutes ago, he gave me this number... said he got you your own phone and everything." The man laughed knowingly this time, making Jou squirm a little inside.

"A pretty sweet deal for you, huh, kiddo?"

Jou, embarrassed by his father's haughtiness, didn't want to comment on it. Seto had been good to him, yes, and they were... well... They were *something*. An "item," maybe. Yes, that was the best way to describe it for now. But by playing along with his father's attitude-by trying to please him as usual-it would seem like a betrayal.

"So, Dad..." How was he going to put this? "Ummm... what's up?"
Yeah, start with that.

"Oh, I was just checking in to see how my son was doing. Are they feeding you well?"

Jou smiled. Maybe, his father actually cared a little. Maybe, this painful incident had made him notice, made him come around. "Yeah! The food's great."

"So, you eat at the long table with all of that fancy china and a hundred forks to use?" He laughed roughly at his own joke.

Jou smirked at that. His dad was trying to keep his spirits up. "Nah, they've got me eating in bed. The nurse brings me food on a tray."

"A nurse?" Jounouchi Katashi said with a purr that Jou took an instant dislike to. "Are we talking cute? High cut dress? Cherry lipstick? You know, really sexy?"

"I think slightly 'hairy' would be a better description." Jounouchi quirked a grin.

"Eh?" It was so loud that Jou had to take the phone away from his ear. He cringed and hoped the ringing in that ear would go away in the next minute so that he could hear again.

"Yeah, Dad. It's a guy."

There was a pause followed by a disinterested "oh" which got Jou smiling again. "And, Dad, you should really see this room. It's got a private bathroom bigger than my old bedroom. I've got every video game out there. And the bed has silk sheets and it's a king. I feel kind of lost in a bed this big. Oh, and out the window, there's some kind of tall, red flower growin'. Pretty, though... It's like something out of a magazine."

"Well, that's good to know, son."

Jou fished around for the pretzel he dropped earlier. It had to be here somewhere. "Yup, and when Kaiba gets off of work, he comes and visits." There was a glow in Jou's voice now. He loved saying Seto's name. It made him feel glad inside. But, then, thinking upon it, his smile faltered a bit at the edges. "Usually, he works late... really long

hours at Kaiba Corp. I'll be lucky if I see him before 10 at night most of the time. I mean, the nurse doesn't want me to stay up late. Still, I end up waiting and everything."

Yes, he was becoming a chatterbox. But, where Kaiba Seto was concerned, Jou found himself easily talking about him, and it made his heart light.

"Still, they're being good to ya," Katashi said in a reassuring tone even though he could hear an annoying pretzel "crunch" over the line. "And I'm happy about that."

Jounouchi brightened as he chewed the last bit. "Me, too."

' Good to me, huh?'

As fantastic as it felt to have his father's words of caring and concern, he still wasn't ready to tell him about Seto and the attachment that they were developing for each other. It was too soon and his father was too narrow minded. It would be best to leave that battle for another day.

And there would be a battle.

"Well, goodbye. I'll be calling you again sometime soon."

Jou grinned brightly. "Sure, Dad."

With a finger pushed against the red button, Katashi ended the call. But, in the next second, he dialed a number he had stored in his phone-the same number of the person who'd called him before.

"Hi, it's me again," he said. He toyed with an unlit cigarette, wiggling it between his fingers. He was just itching to light up. "Yeah, I've got some information... just now. Same arrangements as before? Yeah, just deposit it in my account at Ibis National Bank." He glanced at the end of the cigarette, the scent of tobacco enticing him. "Wha-? It's no problem. I trust you. After all, what are business partners for?"

Trotting through the parking lot, he made his way for the rundown bar with the "open" neon light flickering in the window. Today, his tab would be paid in full... and then some.

"So, uh... when are you coming home?" Mokuba asked, his iPhone phone stuck to his ear as he dug around in the large, double-doored refrigerator.

Mustard, moved.

Cranberry juice in the way.

Shove.

Shove.

"What are you up to?" Seto asked in a monotone as he tapped the keys on his laptop one handed. Only his little brother was worth so much effort. Well, maybe, he could add his mutt to the list. Yes, well. Now that he thought about it, he probably would.

"Me? Nothing. Why?"

Not in the mood for left over soba.

Apples? Nah.

Miso? Nuh-uh.

"You sound distracted," Seto drawled in his usual way while he clicked "send."

"Oh?" The dark haired child ruffled his own hair sheepishly. "I guess I am..."

"So, what is it... besides you asking me to come home?"

Milk? Nope.

Strawberry jam. Too sweet.

What's inside here?

Tin foil peeled back.

"Well, I'm not doing much... just looking for a bedtime snack for me and Jounouchi."

Seto frowned into the phone. "You know I don't allow after dinner snacks. It leads to childhood obesity."

Mokuba wrinkled his nose. "Well, you could use a few snacks yourself. You're too thin. And nobody will want to date you."

Okay, that was a dig. Mokuba was onto him.

"Not the point," Seto returned with an edge that he knew his brother would easily ignore. "I think you're only using Jounouchi as an excuse to ignore the rules and run amok in the house while I'm gone."

The child grinned impishly and switched the phone to his left ear. "So, does that mean you'll come home now?" he asked, forcing his voice to sound casual.

Seto sighed. "I suppose..."

"I see..." he deadpanned. *Yay for me!* Mokuba did a little happy dance around the kitchen, leaving the refrigerator door wide open.

He did it because he could.

"And, once I get home, I'd better see a hot pizza waiting for me to eat with you two!"

Mokuba, totally losing it, cheered over the phone. "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

"Anything," the young CEO added, "but pineapple. That stuff makes me sick."

The dark haired child closed the refrigerator with a slam and gave his older brother a salute. "Sir! Right away, sir!"

"Yes, I'd say that 'sir' is entirely appropriate in this situation." He smirked his trademark smirk, closing the laptop and putting it in its case. "I'll be home in twenty."

And, with that, Mokuba streaked off to Jou's room to share the good news.

It was a good thing he had Pizza Planet on speed dial.

"Damn it!" Tanaka spat as he rounded the corner. *Just one slip up! One!* Yes, that street vendor's rice crackers looked good and he thought he could just casually sneak a bag without anyone noticing.

But he was wrong.

Now, he had a screaming middle aged Japanese woman running after him and, by the looks of things, she was catching up. Worse yet, her big mouth was like a siren and everyone on this side of the sidewalk and across the street seemed to be staring.

Stupid bitch!

"Oi, look! It's that Tanaka person!" a voice shouted.

Tanaka just glanced to the side and noticed a spiky haired kid with tri-color hair and a tight, black outfit pointing a finger at him.

"Hell, Yugi Motou! Why is he here?!"

Okay, now it had officially gotten worse.

Arms pumping, Tanaka darted down a muddy alleyway with one last glance in Yugi's direction. Apparently, he'd been so startled to see him that a Duel Monsters card had been dropped from his deck and a girl with chin-length bobbed brown hair was darting into traffic to fetch it.

Tanaka snickered inwardly as he turned back. Yugi, the number one star duelist on the planet and best friend of Jounouchi-twerp, seemed busy trying to rescue his little girly from herself. Then again, if she was going to play in traffic, she deserved to become roadkill.

Unintelligible words were being shouted from behind. Was the woman a human megaphone? *It was just a bag of snacks, damn it!*

Had he really tried, Yugi might have had a slim chance of following him. Instead, Tanaka's only worry was shaking off the woman who was still making tracks behind him.

The desperate young man zigzagged past a few broken fruit crates and around a rather large recycling bin. He turned a corner, jogged in place for a second as his mind clicked, and then darted down the next available alley, trying to blend in with a crowd of American tourists. "And, over here..." a blond twenty-something year old woman with a blue T-shirt that had "Asian Super Tours" written on it, "there is the best place to eat soba. We'll be going in here in a minute." She ushered on the gaijin cattle call with a sweeping gesture. "Okay... we're walking... we're walking... we're going in the restaurant..."

Tanaka's stomach growled.

Oh, shut up! he thought as he gripped his stolen bag of snacks a little tighter in his fist.

Tanaka bit his lip, thinking. He couldn't go back to his favorite place- the place where he kept hidden all of the things he would need for his visit to the Kaiba Mansion. It wasn't like he could take personal

possessions with him into the homeless shelter each night anyway. So, his hiding place was necessary.

Footsteps. But slower this time.

He could actually hear the old battleaxe breathing hard.

No, not that way. In the next moment, his mind racing, he'd discovered a narrow, rusted ladder along the side of a warehouse leading upwards towards the roof.

He'd take it. But, first, he'd duck back behind some trashcans filled with old cardboard boxes. Yes, he'd wait here. He was good at waiting-biding his time. And, once everything was quiet, he'd explore the roof and, maybe, sleep there tonight.

In his dress shirt pocket, Kaiba's phone rang in a series of beeps. He had one ring tone for Mokuba, one for Jounouchi, and one for business. All others had the default which was a "b-b-beep."

He raised an eyebrow at it. Who would be calling him at this number and at this hour on a Saturday? And it wasn't like he wasn't busy at the moment. Seto was finishing the final touches on a business proposal with a vendor and, if he stopped now, he'd probably forget the point where he was at.

B-b-beep. B-b-beep. B-b-b-beep.

Seto gritted his teeth and debated, briefly, whether or not he should let it go to voicemail.

He pulled the slender phone out and glanced at the caller ID before flipping the phone open with his thumb.

"Talk to me Motou," Seto ordered with an annoyed edge.

This had better be good.

"Kaiba-kun? Is that you?" Yugi sounded upset.

"Who else would it be?" Seto sniped back but something, some instinct within him, set him on edge. Icy blue eyes brightened and he could feel his body becoming rigid.

This felt like a surprise and he hated surprises. The only surprises that Seto liked were the ones that he arranged-ones that inconvenienced people to his amusement.

"Oh, Kaiba-kun! Thank the gods I was able to reach you!" He sounded relieved.

Seto closed his laptop, refusing to allow himself to be distracted by work. He closed his eyes, concentrating on the voice at the other end. "And you need...?" Yes, he was being rude but he really wanted the spiky haired duelist to just spit out what he had to say and be done with it.

"Today... I... uh..." There was an awkward pause. "What I'm trying to say is..."

" *What?!* " This was getting stupid.

"I saw Tanaka!"

Seto bolted upright in his black leather chair. " *What?!* "

"A few minutes ago... on my way to the Mr. Doughnuts with Anzu... we were going to have a duel over apple fritters and..."

"Wait!" Seto practically shouted into the phone. "You saw that bastard on the street and you didn't do anything about it?" Then, a flash of logic hit him. This was Yugi-Mr. Nice Guy and Mr. Failure-at-all-sports-kun. Bringing himself back to reality by slamming a fist onto his desk, he said harshly, "Then, why didn't you call the police? Can you give a description? What did he look like? What was he was

wearing?" The young CEO shook his head to clear it. "Never mind all that... Explain the whole thing to me in detail!"

Yugi paused for a second and said, "Which question do you want answered first? Besides, I just got off the phone with the Domino Police. I'm still here. And they're going to meet me at the corner. I just thought you and Jounouchi-kun would like to know what happened."

Seto stood up from his desk and made his way for the door. "Oh, you're going to go over the whole encounter with me..." He turned the knob. "And, whatever you do, do not call Jounouchi and tell him."

Seto walked; He was a man on a mission.

Yugi paused on the phone and his tone turned slightly suspicious. "Why ever not?" followed by another pause. "Oh, wait... I see. You're intending to keep this a secret from him, huh?"

This didn't feel right.

Seto turned to the left and started walking towards Jou's room. There was an overwhelming desire to see him that logic couldn't define or explain. Just "need" and "want"-instinct pushing him. He had to reassure himself that the blond was okay, just sleeping in. He could feel foolish later. But that would be fine. No one would know.

"Start from the top and tell me everything," Seto demanded, "or I'll come down there myself and you really don't want that, do you?"

It was both a threat and a promise.

Yugi sighed, defeated. "Fine. Here's what happened..."

Seto folded up his phone and was about to knock on the door, which was open ajar, when he noticed a pair of honey colored eyes staring at him, head tilted curiously to the side.

"Something?" Jou asked from where he sat.

Seto stiffened. How odd that he could read him like this with them being together for only such a short time.

"It's..." A lie as protection would have been easy. But, truth be told, he had intended to say absolutely nothing until he had the whole situation well under control. But, for some reason, he just couldn't do it and the words "Yes, I would say so" tumbled out before he could stop himself.

Jounouchi nodded slowly, took the edge of the covers and pulled them back. He patted the mattress. "Why don't cha kick off your shoes and join me here?"

Seto, frustrated, ran his hand through his bangs. "Do you honestly believe that will solve anything... anything at all?"

He sounded like the same old Kaiba Seto from school. It was the tone.

"Well, you could give it a try. You might feel better." But, then, dropping his voice Jou went on with, "but I kind of think this has something to do with me. So, maybe, *I'll* feel better if you do." He shrugged his shoulders with a bit of a blush coming. "I'll have someone to lean on."

There it was-that uncertain smile. Brave and pained at once. And Seto could feel his resolve slipping.

Left shoe. Right shoe.

The bed dipped.

"We need to talk," Seto began as he pulled the covers up around his waist. He thought he looked silly sitting up in the bed like this, fully dressed-again. At least Jounouchi was wearing striped pajamas.

It seemed like they'd been doing things like this a lot lately-including last night's pizza party with Jou in pajamas, himself in a business suit, and Mokuba still wearing his rugby outfit (which was clean for once because practice was called off).

"Yes, we definitely need to talk," Seto said grimly.

Jou took a breath and held it for a beat. "That's not a good opening line. Kinda sounds like a breakup." He said it as a joke, but the quiver in his voice was a dead giveaway.

Seto sliced him a look-a "how ludicrous" look. And Jounouchi sat up a little more in the bed, now reclining against the ornately carved wooden headboard.

"What I have to say is..."

The blond turned away because it was easier and Seto sighed impatiently. Obviously, Jou needed more convincing. He took Jounouchi's hand and rubbed gentle, little circles with his thumb.

"Will you listen to me now?" Seto asked in a soft undertone.

Jou glanced down at their clasped hands and then up into Seto's face. "Yeah."

"Fine."

But the words didn't come right away. Seto was stalling. Jou could tell that much, and it seemed so unlike him. Wasn't this the guy who just blurted things out at school heartlessly? Callously? He just expected people to deal with things as easily as he did.

"So... uh... You were going to say...?" He cocked his head to the side, trying to see Seto better. It was, more or less, the same curious look that Seto got when he first entered the room.

"I suppose there's no good or easy way to tell you..." The young CEO turned in the bed to face Jounouchi. He placed a hand on his

shoulder. "This morning, Mutou saw Tanaka roaming the streets in the center of downtown Domino."

"What?" Jou pressed a hand to his fresh bandages. At the news, he'd tensed up his entire torso. Fear. He didn't know if he wanted to fight or run off. But, it didn't matter right now because of the burning pain that was eating away at him. He huffed a breath and doubled over, pushing his hand hard against his wound in an effort to make the pain stop.

"I knew it," Seto growled between clenched teeth. Stressed, his fingers dug into the material at Jou's shoulder. "Mutou insisted that I tell you but it would have been better..."

"No," Jou gritted out. His hand found Seto's again and he took a shaking breath, trying to will the rest of the pain away. "I'm glad you told me. It means that you trusted me enough... thought I was strong enough to face 'the bad'... as well as 'the good'." He turned to the young CEO and forced a smile. "Thank you... Kaiba... I owe you one."

"Wha-?"

Only Jounouchi could think the worst-that they were breaking up-hear shattering news, and end up thanking him. Seto was amazed at Jou and found his heart melting just a little bit more-a frightening realization in itself. But, Jounouchi made it easy. He made it okay.

"I thought you would be terrified."

Jou shook his head with blond hair flopping into his eyes. "I am... kinda."

"Then, telling you was a mistake." His jaw was set in a way which spoke of self-recrimination.

"It wasn't..." The look was sincere. "Believe me when I tell you... it wasn't." But, Jou's head lowered a little, eyes now staring at his lap.

"So... uh... why don't cha tell me what Yugi saw... okay? I mean, the whole story. I know you pumped him for the info. There's no way that you wouldn't."

A warm arm came around Jounouchi's shoulders and the blond found himself sinking down in the soft bed. Lying down. He was on his side in a minute with Seto spooned up against him. Arms wrapping around-thin, wiry but strong.

"You're safe. I'll protect you..." Seto promised as a prologue. "Do you understand that?"

The blond could feel his heart beating hard. Seto was holding him! Hugging him! All he could do was nod back weakly and let his bedmate speak softly next to his ear.

"It's not much, but here's what happened..."

Jou listened to everything. And he understood it all. But he was at a loss for words with Seto so close and so protective.

There was something between them-a certain bond. And, for the first time Jounouchi came to accept that he was important to Seto. It was not out of obligation from being injured at a Kaiba Corp tournament. It was not out of a sense of "manners" or "duty," for Kaibas didn't respect those things. It wasn't a friendship or even a "best friendship." Their connection, their feelings, ran much deeper.

They always had. They were just too wrapped up in their own lives to notice.

"No one will harm you," the young man with chestnut hair whispered, causing shivers. And, then, he stopped-feeling Jou's small tremors. He pushed himself up on his elbow. "Was that from 'fear' or 'cold'?"

Jounouchi glanced over his shoulder. "I... uh..." He blushed slightly.

"Well?"

Jou bit his lip a little. "Would it be okay if we just stayed like this for awhile?" It was a wonder that he could keep his voice even.

"Of course," Seto said with unmasked concern. He tried to discern an answer from Jou's profile but was unable to. But, more likely than not, the blond really needed his support and the reassurance that he would be safe here at the Kaiba Mansion. "And you'll be fine."

"Thank you." Jou smiled to himself, feeling secure with Seto near.

"You keep saying that," Seto pointed out, not sure if he liked Jounouchi becoming a verbal "thank you" machine. He really needed to stand up for himself more and to simply accept positive things without going overboard on the politeness.

"For you... yeah..." Jou chuckled lightly, feeling a bit sleepy with Seto's warmth against his back. "For you... I'll say 'thank you'... a lot."

"Just for me?" Seto asked as he rested his head on the same pillow as Jou. It was a little bit fun to flirt-to use clever language-with Jounouchi these days. It had been so long since he had someone he could be that way with.

A yawn. "Yeah," the blond said as a sigh, "for you... as long as you hold me."

The young CEO thought for a moment. "Then, I will have to hold you more often."

A contented chuckle. "You better."

Chapter 10

Chapter 10

Mokuba bounded into the bedroom and stopped, practically mid-air.

There were Italian shoes on the floor that looked as though they'd been kicked off. The bed clothes were tangled and knotted up. A bent knee with light blond leg hairs was pointing up awkwardly towards the ceiling.

A soft snort that was unmistakable...

"N-Nii-sama?" he choked out as he stared at the two figures asleep in the king sized bed. His older brother, still dressed the same way he was at breakfast, was under the covers with Jounouchi-hugging the blond possessively. Jounouchi was lying on his back, one knee pointing up, with the first two oversized buttons open on his pajama top, the material falling back and giving a fantastic view of his chest. (Snoring with his mouth fully open ruined the effect, though.)

It was all innocent enough-which took some of the fun out of it, too.

The raven haired child sighed to himself, arms folded with a "What to do?" attitude until an idea popped into his head.

A good one...

Gingerly, he climbed onto the bed. And, little by little-shifting bit by bit-he managed to squeeze in between Jou and Seto without waking them.

"Oi, Nii-sama," Mokuba whispered softly. "Can I play 'Blood and Guts 3'?"

Seto turned and rolled onto his other side, away from the other two. He hummed "Hm?" in a tone which said "Go away."

Mokuba leaned in closer and repeated in an even softer tone, "Can-I-play-'Blood-and Guts-3'?"

Seto rubbed his nose into the pillow, annoyed. "Uh... Sure."

With a devious, crooked smirk coming to him, Mokuba grabbed the universal remote and began punching buttons like a pro. The TV burst into life with the 3D graphic of a hardened, American drill sergeant filling the screen. "HEY, YOU MAGGOTS! GET READY FOR A MISSION TO THE MIDDLE EAST. AND WEAR CLEAN UNDERWEAR BECAUSE THEY'LL BE BROWN BY THE TIME WE'RE DONE HERE!"

Eyes wild, Jounouchi and Seto bolted upright in the bed-hair spiked and frizzed.

"RUN, YOU CUPCAKES, RUN! OVER THAT HILL! NOW!"

A round of ammo fired from the surround sound.

"Mokuba! What in the Seven Hells...?" Seto shouted over the din of rifle shots.

"MOVE IT! MOVE IT! MOVE IT!" More ammo fire.

"Uhh!" Jou shouted. "Make it stop! Make it stop!" He pressed the palms of his hands over his ears, covering them as best he could.

"Give me that!" Seto bellowed, reaching over and snatching the remote from Mokuba's hands. "People in the next province can probably hear this!"

"Nii-sama, you're yelling!"

The TV flicked off, the sound of silence ringing in their ears.

Just then, a pretty maid with platinum blond hair poked her head in the room. "Can I be of any service, Kaiba-sama?" From the looks of the many shifting shadows outside the room, it was clear that she had people waiting behind her-most likely, servants too scared to come in the room and check.

"We're fine," Seto growled with almost a murderous glare at his younger brother. "The television was just too loud." She nodded briefly and left when the young CEO said, "You may go."

"Whoa... my ears are still bugging me," Jou complained, sticking a finger in his right ear and moving it around.

"Ewww! That's really gross, you know," Mokuba shot back with a boyish grin. "Oh, wait... Can you stick one finger in your bellybutton and one in your ear while you poke out your tongue like this?"

He demonstrated and Jou took up the challenge. "Duh! Of course, I can!"

Tongues wagged.

Seto sighed deeply, placed his elbow on his thigh, and rested his cheek in his hand. His bedmates were... well... undignified. He sliced them a glare. "You both look idiotic. Did you know?"

"Dat-z-wha-you-tink," Jou shot back, tongue still draped over his teeth like a happy puppy.

Seto leveled a stare at him, lips pruned together. In an instant, he whipped out his cell phone, clicked a picture, and then admired it. "Now, I wonder who I can send this to...?" he purred deviously. Half the city had given him their phone numbers... just in case.

"Nii-sama!" Mokuba whined. This had "Please beat me up at school" written all over it. And no amount of bribing with Godiva chocolates would allow him to wriggle out.

Jou retracted his tongue. "You're evil!"

"You're just now figuring that out?" A chestnut eyebrow raised.

"But... but!" Jou pushed Mokuba forward and the child was folded over like a lawn chair. He leaned on the kid's back. "You can't do that to me! Me! I mean, 'we'... I mean... ! I... uh..." Jou scrunched his eyes shut. "I mean... Well, *you know* what I mean!"

"I think you mean well," Seto chuckled, "but, right now, Mokuba's in quite a state." He gestured with a pointed finger at his little brother who was, even at that moment, flailing with arms waiving madly.

"I'm gonna get you guys," the raven haired child threatened. "Ugh!"

"Aw... I feel for ya kid," Jou said, pulling Mokuba backwards and into an upright, locked position. "Want a hug... in a totally manly way, of course?" he teased.

"What I *want* is out of here!" Mokuba shouted. He sprinted for the door and slammed it with every ounce of strength he had once he was safe on the other side.

Jou reclined in the bed gently. "Gee, was it something I said?"

Seto placed his cell phone thoughtlessly on the blond's middle-expecting him to delete the photo. "Whatever do you mean?" he joked back.

Then, they both looked at each other and broke into laughs.

"Oi, Kaiba?" was followed by a good-natured chuckle.

"Yes?"

"How do you work this thing?" He picked up the phone and examined it.

"Do you mean... How to work the 'delete' feature?"

"Nah, I wanna take a couple o' pictures of you with your shirt off." A knowing wink followed that one.

The young CEO glanced at him with a growing smirk and a casual toss of the head. This was bold of Jounouchi and he found himself liking it. "So, you can see me whenever you like?"

"Nah, so I can sell them at school. I'd make a fortune from your fan girls!"

And that's how the pillow fight started.

For Tanaka, sleeping on the roof of that old warehouse sucked. All night long, he sat curled up with his back to what was once an office heating unit and tried to stay out of the wind. It wasn't ideal, but, at the very least, he knew he was safe. Now that the sun was coming up, it was time to make tracks. He climbed down the rusty ladder, having, briefly, one last bird's eye view of all that was around him.

Only a handful of cars pattered along with their lights on, going north. A bus, with no one on board, was headed in the opposite direction.

So far, so good...

However, with a new day came new issues. Problem number one was that he was still wearing the same clothes from yesterday. If anybody saw him being chased, he'd be fairly easy to spot with the red polo he swiped from that resale shop. He needed to get back to his personal stash of "stuff" to change into a denim workshirt and blue jeans-blend in with the working, blue collars of this district. With the "Moronobu Construction Products" baseball cap that he liked to wear low over his eyes, he should be fine as long as he avoided places where he could be spotted-places that, even now, would probably have police patrolling it. And, problem number two, he needed to go over that map of the Kaiba Mansion again, memorize it-know every detail.

Tanaka jumped down from the last rung. It was a bit of a drop, but nothing he couldn't handle.

Time to get started.

Yes, he could do it all. He had plans. And, very soon, he would meet up with that loser, Jounouchi, and send him to the *graveyard* . Only, this type didn't allow you to return to "the field."

He typed the words, "Let me know if Tanaka makes another appearance in Domino" and then clicked on "send." Nakajima would keep tabs on things, he was sure.

He rubbed his blue eyes tiredly. He needed a break. Kaiba Seto had been sitting behind his desk for so long that his long legs had gone numb.

Time for coffee.

He stood up slowly from his black leather chair and stretched.

Yes, he needed some java in his cup. But it was also an all too convenient excuse to see a certain honey-eyed blond in his bedroom along the way. Seto wondered what he was up to. It could be a little bit fun to find out.

When Seto went into Jounouchi's room with coffee mug in hand, he noticed the nurse sorting out an arrangement of medical tape, gauze bandages, hydrogen peroxide, polysporin ointment and the like on the nightstand near Jou's side of the bed.

In the background, there was the splish-splashing of the shower coming from the next room. The door was wide open.

Blue eyes narrowed. *Exhibitionist.*

Seto frowned with disapproval until he heard, "I told him to keep the door open... just in case he needs me." There was a wink from Kudo-san that followed which didn't make Seto feel any better. So, the nurse added, "I also told him that when he's doing other 'business' he needs to keep the door unlocked. I've had patients lose consciousness with me not able to get inside quickly enough."

The young CEO's expression changed from disapproval to thinly veiled concern. The cup dangled loosely in one hand, the other rested on his hip.

Splash, splash.

Seto's head, once more, slowly turned to the bathroom doorway. "Has Jounouchi been feeling faint?"

This, he hadn't been informed of.

"It's always a possibility," the nurse explained on his way to the door. "The medications say, 'May cause dizziness or drowsiness... do not operate heavy machinery.' So, it's best to play it safe. And that's what we've been doing so far."

Seto humphed. "The only heavy machine he operates is the PlayStation. And I doubt he'll do any real... or *imaginary*... damage with 'Need for Speed'."

The water shut itself off and an annoyed voice from the bathroom called, "Oi! My scores on 'Need for Speed' are pretty good."

A chestnut colored eyebrow raised at that. "For a monkey, yes..."

"Oi, who you callin' a monkey?"

"Oh, that's right," Seto countered, "you're a mutt."

"Hold it right there a minute..." Jou returned, sounding *put off* and slightly busy with something.

Kudo-san grinned uncomfortably and muttered, "Need more medical tape." With that, he disappeared out the bedroom door.

"Not a dog," Jou growled, walking through the door while wrestling his bathrobe around his thin body, trying to cover it. But he hadn't done so quickly enough and Seto's eyes went to the thick, savage stitches covering Jounouchi's torso.

The blond saw the look and his ire fled. Jou knew he was imperfect now-not that he was all that great, in his opinion, before the incident with Tanaka. But, forever, he'd have thick, pinkish scars. Jou had been told that the priority was keeping him alive, not in having perfect skin. And, on some level, Jou understood that. However, it didn't make him feel any better to have Seto's expression blank out like that. Jou didn't even think it was possible for Seto to even do that-heart of ice, iron will, heartless bastard.

But, why couldn't he be that now? Especially when that was the exact reaction that Jou needed?

Embarrassed, the blond muttered something low under his breath and fumbled with the soft belt to his bathrobe. With a shrug of resignation, he said, "Sorry about that."

What more could he do than apologize?

And he felt that he really had to. Seto was perfect: handsome face, richer than Hell, a world leader in business and industry. Jou knew that he was not any of those things. In the looks department, he was just so-so. As for money, he was lucky when his father sent him enough to pay the rent. The future? Maybe, he'd go on to trade school or start a small business. He'd definitely need to strike out on his own somehow-and soon. But, no matter who he ended up with, this person would have to see the scars and accept them as a part of him.

Jou couldn't wear the bandages forever.

He couldn't hide.

"Something?" Seto asked, apprehensive again.

They were standing so close now. When had Seto crossed the room? Jou hadn't been paying attention, head down.

He shook his head, not trusting his voice at all.

Then, arms took Jou in-gently folding around his body and making Jounouchi lift his head to see Seto's profile.

"Is it your injuries? They've been healing, but not for so long that you couldn't hurt yourself again..." The arms tightened. "Are you dizzy? Or is it pain?"

"I... I was just..." Jou began lamely.

Then, as he expected, the arms disappeared from around him. *Of course, they would*, Jou thought bitterly. Now, he was in for a lecture or he'd have to confess everything he'd been thinking.

Katsuya Jounouchi wasn't in the mood for either.

Tug.

Tug.

Tug.

Surprised, Jou glanced down at the belt to his bathrobe only to see it freed and the material pulled back. Jounouchi blushed as he realized his white boxers were only inches from Seto's face.

Not waiting for words, he'd just took it upon himself to examine Jou-running fingers close to the stitches, looking for signs of infection-ignoring the purple bruising.

"Everything seems fine," he murmured.

"My assessment exactly," the nurse said from the doorway, a fresh roll of medical tape in hand and a smug look on his face. "So, can we wrap this up?" He grinned widely at the young couple frozen awkwardly before him-Seto still kneeling, Jounouchi allowing hands resting against his skin.

With a dignity he certainly didn't feel at the moment, Seto straightened, took his empty mug from the night stand, and made his way for the door. "I'm getting coffee."

The nurse, heading back to the collection of medical supplies agreed with, "And, for now, that's all you're getting."

Jounouchi blushed deeply, fists clinched embarrassingly at his sides. "Kudo-san!" How could he say that out loud?

"I just call 'em as I see em."

"That's even worse!" Jou protested, blushing harder.

"Kaiba-sama didn't seem to mind, though." The nurse glimpsed over his shoulder to see that the young CEO was long gone.

Jounouchi wrapped the robe around himself, squirming slightly in place. "Well, kinda..."

Kudo-san smiled at him. "Then, be happy... don't borrow trouble... and let's get these fresh bandages on."

Still bristling, Kaiba downed two full cups from his Kaiba Land America mug before he'd managed to calm himself down from the embarrassment earlier. What, exactly, possessed him? He'd never felt compelled to simply examine Jou before, hands tracing patterns on bare skin.

And, then, to get caught at it.

In frustration, he let his head fall back onto his shoulders.

I'm an idiot, idiot, idiot!

It was bad-well, kind of. Strange or weird maybe... certainly not the image he wanted to convey at all. Not the image he'd spent years crafting, building, shaping.

It was so mortifying.

Then again... If he remembered right, Jou seemed surprised, too, but he didn't fight back or argue the point. He just seemed to freeze and was no longer fuming at that "mutt" comment.

So, he wasn't angry or insulted. That's good.

Jounouchi's feelings mattered to him now, he had to admit. And that made life more comfortable for some reason.

On the other hand, Kaiba decided, *the nurse had no right to tease*. And he was half way tempted-out of pride-to fire the man for stepping over the boundary of their master-servant relationship.

Yes, that would be easy. *Fire him*. But, then a frown came as reality set in. Seto knew that Jounouchi would never stand for it. He seemed almost dependent on the man-looking for a *father* in his new caregiver.

Better than the real thing, Seto sighed to himself. And he knew it to be true. Jou's father rubbed him the wrong way-even in that last, seemingly innocent, phone call wanting to know how to contact his son. There was something off, something misshapen. *A real rat bastard*, he thought grimly. Sharpened by business instincts, he knew full well not to trust the elder Jounouchi. There was something wrong about him, about the way he was raising Jou, and their whole living arrangement for that matter.

Come to think of it, he just might be worth investigating .

So, going back to his original problem, the long and the short of it was that he simply couldn't fire Jou's nurse for that little cheeky display back there.

Damn. He poured himself another cup.

What kind of face would he show this nurse the next time they met up? *A business-like one.* Yes, that would be it.

He took a sip of coffee.

And Jou? *Well, I'll have to watch and see-play it moment by moment.* What he was certain of was that Jou cared about him and the feeling was mutual.

Growing.

And, for some reason, that made everything easier, clearer.

And it made his *house* seem a little bit more like a *home* .

Their home...

Chapter 11

Chapter 11

He didn't take the direct route, fearing he might be followed. But, in less than a half hour, Tanaka returned to his "spot" behind the bakery-the place where he had his personal stash. Shifting empty green recycling cans aside, he could make out his dusty white cardboard box with the black scribbled marks over the logo. In it, he had: the fake passport that named him as Jon Cho, a dagger, the house plans to the Kaiba Mansion with Jou's room marked in red, and a set of filthy work clothes-a denim workshirt and blue jeans with the "Moronobu Construction Products" baseball cap-that he'd worn twice before this. The original clothes that his unknown benefactors had given him were in the box as well.

Tanaka ran his eyes over the white box again. He was able to make out the logo in the bright morning sun. Even with the dark black marker scribble over it, he could make out the embossed words "Kaiba Corp."

"So, I have friends on the inside. That makes sense," he said to himself, quite pleased. It also made sense that people in Kaiba Corp would notice the resemblance between himself and his hero, note the holy mission that he was on, and give support when it was possible.

Tanaka moved behind the trashcans to avoid being detected. He could hear signs of life on the street-more people moving about-and he was still worried about the red polo he was sporting. He really needed to change his clothing.

Shirt half off, he noticed something-a small white bag had been added to his things. Dropping the edge of his shirt, he carefully put his hand in the box and withdrew the small, white pouch.

Opening the drawstring, Tanaka was pleased to see thousands and thousands of yen with the typed note, "The caged bird's room has a red flower outside the window. Also, buy a ticket."

Tanaka thought this a strange request. Why would he need to buy a ticket? Once he was through with Jounouchi, and his influences over Kaiba-sama, certainly the genius hero would note all that he'd done and reward him. There was no need to go anywhere. It would all be settled instantly.

His eyes went to the cash again.

Still, there might be the need to buy a few little items for tonight-more than just the dagger might be needed. *Rope* . Rope would be good and a gag, too. He could buy cheap "Welcome to Domino" bandanas from the tourist vendors near the airport.

Easy enough.

The rope, he could get from the hardware store around the corner. Say, he needed to pull up a small tree from his property. Yes, that would be a good story. He'd go with that.

The young man unfolded the map to the mansion. Yes, today was the day noted on it. All he had to do was wait for the right "time." And that wait would be a hard one after having to make due for a solid week.

He glanced again. There were the marks on the map-showing the best route to take. But, since he was entering his master's house, he decided that it would be fine to make a slight detour before entering Jou's room and taking care of business.

A personal tour.

Tanaka smiled to himself. Yes, he certainly deserved that. After all he'd done and sacrificed, a little deviation would be fine-a treat. And it wasn't like anybody could stop him.

Tanaka pulled his shirt over his head and began to undress.

There was a white couch at one end of the room made specifically for him by the Italian furniture designer, Paolo Zani. Across from it was a coffee table made of teak and clear glass. A small vase with lucky bamboo stood on it-a gift from his new secretary. On the opposite side of the room was Seto's handcrafted desk, unnaturally clean-no paperwork, and a matching leather chair framed in the background by an overbearing, rectangular window.

Like him: sleek, streamlined, seemingly cold.

With the laptop open and the cursor blinking at him, Kaiba Seto sat in his plush office at Kaiba Corp and tried not to obsess too much about his soon-to-be "late night dinner in room" date Jounouchi. He'd texted the request ten minutes ago and got an almost immediate "Yes!"

The last time they'd been together had turned out embarrassing enough. But it was concern that had driven him to it, Seto decided, and those actions-born out of apprehension-were still difficult to process.

He played the scene over in his mind again, trying, somehow, to make it seem more innocent-which it was-and less sexual.

Did Jou see it that way, too?

The thought was eating at him as he minimized the word processing program and then clicked on the gateway to his Kaiba Corp e-mail.

More e-mail filled his box. A lot more.

Seto frowned at it. *Ridiculous*. He hated it when his staffers used the "send all" feature and then he'd get everything from petty office arguments to junk joke e-mails. When would people grow up, shut

up, show up to work, do their jobs, and then go home at a reasonable hour-say seven o' clock at night?

That's what he did on a routine basis.

With a frustrated sigh, Seto got to work.

Jounouchi slurped the bottom of his lemon-lime slushy cup with the straw, making a strong sucking noise that pleased him down to the bottom of his heart. It was the kind of thing he took great pleasure in but knew that Seto would probably hate.

He slurped twice more with gusto.

Done!

Honey-colored eyes went to the clock. Nope. Seto would still be at work, and it was getting boring around the house. The servants were gone with the exception of the pretty girl maid who had ducked into their room when Mokuba had cranked that video game up to full blast. Jou wasn't sure what she was doing, but she seemed to be carrying half-eaten trays of food back to the kitchens.

She winked as she passed.

Jou lowered his head, slightly embarrassed.

"Well... uh... Maybe, Seto feeds his security team," Jou mumbled to himself. It was probably part of the job-providing a meal or two so that the men didn't need to go out in search of anything. The odd part was that he didn't see the men in black coming or going that often. And, when he did see someone, he often assumed that he or she was going to Seto's office. For, he'd be in at those times, not at Kaiba Corp.

Jou glanced at the clock again and thought of Seto. It had been exactly two minutes since the last time he checked. Okay, Jounouchi

had to admit it to himself that he was a little excited and nervous about having the young CEO coming back to his room. The last time they'd been together, they'd been "caught," so to speak. And he knew that the two of them were really not doing anything. However, the mere suggestion-the implication-was enough to make him wriggle uncomfortably. Maybe, it was propriety that made him do it. Maybe, it was a sign that he wasn't ready to have a steady "boyfriend" or anyone with that title in his life. But, now that he thought about it, the person he really wanted by his side was Seto. The person he'd prefer to rely on or cry to-if need be-was Seto. It wasn't that he wanted him to fix all of his problems. It was just that there was a kind of comfort in being together-someone who filled that gap.

"Kaiba," he sighed. "I wish you could make time speed up. And, then, we..."

THUMP.

The sound came from the hallway. It was odd, heavy-hard.

"Hello? Somebody?" Jou called. "Kudo-san?"

He waited a minute, listening. But he didn't hear anything. "That's strange," the blond said, getting out of bed with the cup in hand. He tilted it around, making the straw spin in a circle. In a louder voice, "Kudo-san? What was that?"

Was that a sound?

He thought he heard a long, dragging noise coming from the hallway.

Jounouchi made it to the door and peeked. Both ways, the hallway was empty. Only the cranberry carpet, decorative tables, and lush interior plants remained.

"Weird," Jou said to himself, going back in.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Jou wondered what was going on. The house was too empty, too quiet. Where was his nurse?

Jounouchi put the cup down on the end table and picked up the phone. If he pressed "3" and held it down, he'd get a direct line to Kudo-san's cell phone. And, with a slight shrug, he did.

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP...

Jounouchi blinked at that. He could hear the sound but it seemed faint.

BEEP... BEEP... BEEP...

There it was again, but further off... going away in the direction of the stairs.

In the distance, a THUNK.

"Mokuba? Are you here? Is Kudo-san with you?" he called.

There it was again. The phone.

"Where is...?"

Worried, Jounouchi got up and left the room, taking a right and going down the hallway to the foyer. If he took the stairs upward, he would get to the playroom, Mokuba's room, and Seto's room. At least, that's what he was told.

Jounouchi padded barefoot down the hallway in his pajamas. Part of the hallway where it opened to the foyer was breezy and Jounouchi began to wish that he'd put on his robe or even some socks.

He shivered.

Looking around, Jounouchi noticed that the room was dark. The stairs were, too. Only the light at the top of the stairs was on.

"This is stupid," Jounouchi muttered, finding himself rattled by the expanse of the room and the darkness it held. "I really should have..."

And, then, the shape of a child appeared at the top of the stairs-small and dark haired. A tall and thin figure appeared next to it, hand on his hip.

"Ah, well... if it isn't the Kaiba brothers," Jounouchi said with relief.

He felt better now.

In his office, Seto picked up his cell phone. It was a call from his man, Sasaki Ken, who worked directly under Nakajima. He performed thorough background checks and general research. He could dig up everything from speeding tickets to late house payments-your relatives and every teacher you ever had.

"This had better be good," the young CEO said, "because I've got a dinner date in forty-five minutes." He glanced at his new Rolex.

"I've got the research on that Jounouchi Katashi-san subject that you've been looking for," the man said with a touch of smugness.

Jou's father...

"I'm e-mailing it over to your cell phone now. And you're going to be very surprised where his latest phone calls have been coming from."

"Seriously?" Seto returned, a little intrigued.

"Yes... sir," Sasaki said, "They've been coming from a Kaiba Corp mobile phone."

He almost fell out of his leather chair. "What?"

"And, as you can see from my report," the investigator went on, "certain payments to the subject have been coming out of an

entertainment budget from Kaiba Corp. I've included the account numbers and..."

Only certain offices had "entertainment budgets" that didn't have to clear with him until the beginning of the quarter- *before* the money was spent. Only certain people had that minor privilege, to meet with him via video conferencing and to discuss the "who-where-and why" of the funds being spent, waiting for a verbal "okay." On the whole, it was for drinks after work with some minor vendor or subcontracting office that Seto really didn't care about and had no intention of getting roped into going.

Kaiba Seto collected his thoughts, not really listening to the rest of the report. It was all in the e-mail anyway.

"When was the last payment sent?" he interrupted. He needed to know that at least. If it had been awhile back, then he didn't need to worry but...

"This morning-open of business at the Ibis National Bank."

That's not good, the young CEO thought to himself. "Well, if you come across any other information, I'll expect it to be e-mailed to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

And, with that, Seto snapped his phone shut. He closed the laptop faster than the machine could power down and he left the office-only pausing to lock the door as he went.

Something within Seto was telling him to leave. Leave now. Go now. Staying in one place-working-was something he couldn't do. And on the occasions when he got that feeling, he always went with it, whether it was personal or business.

Instinct was everything.

He got to the elevator and pushed the speed dial for Jounouchi's phone. He let it ring until it went to voicemail. "Jou? Where are you? Why aren't you picking up?" Seto shook his head at that. He dialed again, ringing up his brother. Mokuba was supposed to be home studying for a test. The phone went to voicemail. "Why does he have a phone at all if he keeps it turned off?"

By now, Seto was in the parking garage, stomping towards his black Lotus. And a thought then struck. He'd dial Jounouchi's nurse. The phone, too, went immediately to voicemail.

"Stupid!" he hissed as he unlocked the door with a chirp and got into the seat.

With a slightly shaking hand, he was about to call his men in black until his eyes glanced at the clock.

The changing of the guard.

There was always a five minute meeting when one shift informed the other shift of the day's events, any new orders, and any new electronics that were installed or removed.

Five minutes.

Seto's eyes narrowed as he sped from the parking garage.

Bad. He was feeling bad. Something had gone wrong and he was going to find out what.

"Oi, guys!" Jounouchi said with a friendly wave to the shadowed figures on the stairs. "What's up? Having fun without me?" He laughed and ran his fingers through his hair. "That's not really fair, you know."

The blond put a foot on the lowest stair and wildly, Mokuba shook his head "no." He seemed to have his hands behind his back-which

seemed odd to Jounouchi. Usually, the kid was an explosion of gestures and energy.

"Wha? Got nothing to say to that, Mokuba?" Jou called cheerily.

Again, the child shook his head until a hand gripped his shoulder tightly. He turned to look at it.

"Mokuba?" Jou said, half way up the stairs now. "What's up? You're too quiet."

Jou put a hand to his bandages. Maybe, climbing stairs was a bad idea. He stopped on a step and pressed his hand in, breathing a bit hard. He was almost half way up and was now thinking that this climb wasn't such a good idea. He was getting tired-more so with each moment he was balancing himself on the stairs.

Mokuba was shaking his head "no"-which was curious to Jou. And all of his sounds were muffled.

Jounouchi glanced up at the child as the lights flashed on.

He blinked.

The tall, thin form standing next to Mokuba changed from Seto's face to Tanaka's.

"Hi, Loser," Tanaka teased. "Ready to play a little? One last time, for old time's sake?" He put the edge of the dagger next to Mokuba's throat. "Somehow, I think you'll play with me even without the cards. It will be fun... right?"

Mokuba stood next to the man. His arms were bound with rope and his mouth had been gagged with bandanas-a wad inside his mouth and a thin strip of cloth on the outside to keep everything in place. The child tried not to swallow or he'd gag again. The cloth was filled with his saliva and his eyes were shedding tears at the corners.

Mokuba cringed with the hand at his forearm, rattling him, and the scrape of the dagger at his throat.

"And if you don't play, I think that something... terrible... might happen to Kaiba Seto-sama's little brother." Tanaka's eyes went over the railing. He took in the marble floor below. "And it would be your fault... for being too much of a coward to play."

Jounouchi pressed a hand to his bandages, keeping the ache away. He began to take faster steps up-climbing up to where Tanaka and Mokuba waited.

But the climb was hard.

Need to buy time...

"How did you get in the mansion?" he rasped. "There's security all over the place."

The smile was a pale shadow of Seto's and it made Jou sick inside. The young man reached into his blue work shirt and pulled out a map. "I had help. And there's no such thing as air tight security." He grinned. "If someone wants to get into your house badly enough, they will."

Jounouchi shook his head. "It's not my house. This is the Kaiba Mansion. I'm only staying here for a little while."

Tanaka took him in with hatred in his eyes. "Yes! So, what I want to know is how you did it!"

Now, at the top of the stairs, Jou shook his blond head "no." "I'm telling you, I didn't do nuthin'!"

"Oh, yes... yes, you did!" he seethed. "Somehow, you managed to get Kaiba-sama's sympathy! You won his pity and he, gloriously, bestowed upon you the honor of being here." His grip increased on Mokuba and the child yelped through the gag. "But, what I want to

know is how you did it! How did you trick such a genius, such a masterful man as Kaiba-sama into letting you into his home, into his life!" He raised his hand, still clutching the dagger.

"So, Loser... TELL ME HOW!"

The shouts were echoing now and Jou was hoping someone would hear. Someone had to hear, had to help them.

Please, let someone come!

The blond could feel the drum of his own heartbeat. "Just let Mokuba go, man," Jounouchi pleaded, taking one step forward. "He's got nothing to do with this. And Kaiba will be furious that you threatened his brother. He'll never forgive you, ya know."

Tanaka pulled Mokuba back with the end of the rope. "Oh, he will... Once he sees that I'm here to open his eyes... to show him what a clinging, gold-digging loser you really are. He'll know." Tanaka pointed a finger at himself and said, "He'll thank me. Just like he'll thank me for getting rid of that male nurse of yours!"

"K-Kudo-san?" Jou felt his blood run cold. *Oh, no!* "What did you do to him?"

"Let's just say he's taking a little nap in the linen closet."

Jou took another step forward, desperation starting to show on his face now. "No more, okay?"

His honey-colored eyes turned to Mokuba. He was being so brave, standing there-bound-by someone who vaguely resembled his older brother.

"Tanaka, I'll agree to anything you want. But, you have to let Mokuba go first."

Tanaka's eyebrows furrowed and the dagger went back to Mokuba's throat. "You don't make the rules here!" He gave Mokuba's shoulder

a shove. "I make the rules!" A harder shove. "Now, you're going to do what I say!"

Mokuba was knocked to his bum near the railing-spindles obscuring his view of the marble foyer below. The raven haired child turned his head, seeing Tanaka and Jounouchi staring each other down.

"You think you can best me?" the man said, grinning.

Jounouchi narrowed his eyes. "All I have to say is..." He turned his head. "MOKUBA, RUN!" And, then, he ran forward and made a go for the dagger.

"Right!" Like a rabbit, Kaiba Mokuba made a scramble for the stairs. There was a long length of rope trailing behind him-Tanaka tried stepping on it to stop him, but found someone diving on top.

The dagger went spinning off, through the wooden stair spindles, and down to the marble floor below.

"Get security, Mokuba!" Jou shouted to the air as a fist met his face.

Sneakers slapped the floor and quickly trailed off.

Jounouchi doubled up his fist and gladly returned the favor-hitting Tanaka square in the jaw, feeling something give way as he did. He probably broke two fingers, but it felt good. Now, on top of the intruder, Jounouchi had a hand at his throat, pushing his enemy flat on his back.

Tanaka tried to elbow Jou and managed to miss his stitches, but all of the tussling and kicking was making Jou ache in ways he didn't dream possible. Then, another blow, much closer to his stitches and the blond could feel something stretch and pop.

Jou could hear screams and, at some point, realized that they were his. And the echo of the foyer seemed to mock him.

They scrambled over each other. Rolling. But, Jou managed to get on top again.

"Ass-wipe!" Tanaka hissed with bloodied teeth. "You're useless to Kaiba-sama! And you'll never belong in his world."

Jounouchi nodded to that and a cold darkness fell over him. "Too true." *I don't belong here... in this fancy world.*

"And, you're weak!" Tanaka spat blood.

"Yeah, you may really think that I'm a nice guy, but in middle school, I was in a gang." He gave Tanaka a blow to the head as hard as he could. "I did things I'm not proud of. Terrible things. But, I never kidnapped a kid!" Another strike. His knuckles were bleeding now.

"This is for Mokuba!"

A blow.

"This is for making him afraid in his own home!"

A blow.

Fury took him. His whole body was numb. "This is for Kaiba! *My Kaiba !*"

A blow.

"And this is..."

Jounouchi's hand stopped in mid air. Caught.

Honey colored eyes widened and his head turned in the direction of his fist.

"And this is enough," Kaiba Seto said, his eyes gesturing towards Tanaka on the floor. "He's out cold."

Jou looked and saw that, in fact, Seto was correct. Absolutely correct.

"Get up," Seto ordered Jou. The tone was more "worried" than "angry." He used the hand to help the blond to his feet.

A maid-the exact same one who had returned the meal trays earlier-came running up the stairs with a handgun drawn. Men in black rushed up the stairs behind her. Five fanned out, monitoring possible entrances and exits. The others went for the prone man on the floor.

"Take him," Seto said coldly, pointing at the bloodied Tanaka. "And call the police. I want everything by the book. Make sure that the police have everything that they need... including any surveillance videos, audio recordings, etc." He turned to the maid standing on his right as she put on her dark sunglasses and returned the gun to its thigh holster. "We'll make an example out of this one."

"Yes, sir!" she said, enthused.

"She's a...?" Jou blinked. Mokuba nodded. "She's one of the best 'men in black' around... and, someday, she'll be all mine." He gave a sexy wink.

"O... Okay..." The blond rubbed his aching hand. The knuckles were raw. Two fingers were quickly purpling and were sticking out at odd angles when he made a fist. Pain. Pain was there, too. Seto could see it in his eyes.

Mokuba returned to Seto's side, rubbing his sore wrists with the rope burns. "He really saved me, Nii-sama. That Tanaka guy was ready to throw me over the side."

Jounouchi shook his head. "It wasn't anything great. I was furious and..." He couldn't hide the pain any longer. He took harsh breaths, hands covering the bandages. But it didn't matter. He could feel the blood trickling down-wet and warm.

Red splatters hit the pristine floor.

"Sorry." And he dropped to his knees as the men in black dragged Tanaka away.

"Jounouchi!"

"Jou!"

Without embarrassment or second thoughts, Seto unbuttoned the top of Jounouchi's pajama top and flinched. The bandages were soaked in red, more dripping down onto his bottoms.

Seto's slender fingers went to the bandages and Jou shied away, wanting the pressure to stop. "H-Hurts," he admitted reluctantly. Then, he turned his face up and smiled wryly. "I'm sorry, Kaiba. I really am."

The world felt distant, clouded.

He was crumbling. Falling.

Jou could feel the warmth of a shirt pressing into his cheek and the words, "Mokuba, call an ambulance" coming to him.

"No," Jou sighed. "... Don't wanna leave you... please..."

And, then, darkness.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12

Without bothering to hide his distain, Kaiba Seto sat down at what he considered to be a substandard-if not out and out *filthy* -conference table at the Domino Police Station-totally unworthy of a Kaiba. He had only just arrived from the hospital, this business taking him from Jounouchi's bedside.

Seto didn't know which he hated more-the musty, stifling conference room or Jounouchi's hospital room, heavy with the scent of disinfectant.

At his right, the Chief of Police, Hashimoto Ichiro, sat with a file folder open before him, jotting down a few notes with a well-used, freebie ink pen that had "Tires Plus" written on the side in Katakana. Standing directly behind him was an assistant-chomping at the bit to be of some use in this high profile case. Her thick, brown framed glasses flashed each time she leaned over nervously to point something out to her boss. At his left, one of Seto's men in black was whispering in the ear of Matsushita Fumi while Nakajima entered with a medium-sized black padded computer case.

Seto's criminal lawyer, Midorikawa, entered with a serious expression on his face along with two more men in black, neutral as always. The door opened again and three high ranking uniformed police officers filed through with more manila folders of paperwork.

This was getting tiresome.

"Shall we get started?" Seto asked. It was how he began all meetings and it worked fairly well here, too. All eyes turned to him.

The Chief of Police gave a slightly startled look, not expecting his "special guest" to take such liberties. But as the seconds ticked away in his mind, he couldn't help but think, *The arrogance!* He wanted to ask in his most dominating tone, "Who do you think you are?" His faded eyes glanced around. This, of course, was the Domino Police Station. The chief understood that he was the one who called meetings to order, not some rich jerk-even if he did run a multi-million yen corporation.

The old man huffed and his assistant, noticing, leaned a little closer to the wall to give distance.

The plan was to get Kaiba Seto and his cronies all in the same place so that they could be split up and interrogated for the sake of protocol. The video and audio from the mansion was being reviewed right now. And, by all accounts, it appeared that Tanaka had acted on his own as far as getting into the elaborate home. Interestingly, he had deviated from the map, which was later found on him by the ambulance EMTs, after receiving a good, sound beating by the victim, Jounouchi Katsuya. And, based on evidence, Tanaka had roamed the second floor for a few minutes previously before he'd stumbled across Kaiba Mokuba who, upon realizing the situation, tried to alert the staff but was unable to do so.

Still, the investigation was continuing and there were a lot of questions to answer.

Finished with her face powder, Matsushita Fumi put her compact back into her purse. "I know it's late, Kaiba-sama. And I'm more than happy to help in this... oh, so disturbing matter... but I don't see how..." she said sweetly, batting her eyelashes at him.

The Chief of Police rolled his eyes at that. *They're probably sleeping together*, he thought sourly. Thank the heavens that he, himself, was nearing retirement. He didn't need to hear the ins-and-outs of a high school senior, CEO's budding sex life.

Nakajima, at a nod from Seto, opened the black case and took out a large Kaiba Corp laptop, booted it up, and placed it at one end of the conference table.

"This is some evidence that we were sure that the police would be interested in," Kaiba said with a smirk coming to him. "So, we thought it only prudent to share."

The screen lit up and, using a remote keyboard-mouse device taken from his pocket, Seto navigated his way into his KC E-mail. "Here, I've got reports from my best investigator regarding Tanaka, witnesses who have seen him, and information on a 'Jounouchi Katashi'... the victim's father."

The assistant behind the Chief of Police began scribbling down on her note pad, eyes wide.

"The victim's father...?" the elderly chief parroted, clearly confused.

Seto's smirk widened. "Yes, apparently... he had been in contact with someone who gladly provided funds to his bank account on more than one occasion..." The young CEO straightened up in his chair. "Those funds coming from Kaiba Corp itself."

Everyone stared.

"Seriously?" Matsushita breathed, pulling a long strand of dyed hair out of her face and tucking it behind her ear. Even the men in black and Nakajima looked surprised.

"Yes, quite."

He, then, navigated to one of the reports and clicked on it. The document opened and Seto highlighted the text.

"According to... *rumors*..." Seto cut his eyes to the chief again. "The police have discovered a filthy box that was used by Tanaka... His prints being all over it."

The Chief of Police paled. That report had not been officially filed just yet. How did this young twerp's people find out?

"The box has a Kaiba Corp logo that was scribbled out... in a *weak* attempt to disguise it. But, it was there." Seto straightened up in his seat and crossed his legs casually. "And, based on the dimensions of the box and the few offices in Kaiba Corp Japan that actually use that type..." His blue eyes drifted to Nakajima. "Come to think of it... Your office uses those... am I right?"

"Wha-?" Nakajima straightened, shoulders back and military stiff. He frowned deeply, shaking his head with a sharp "no" as in, "This can't be."

Seto actually smiled this time and noted that Matsushita seemed more than pleased with the results. A girlish wiggle in her seat. She was eating this up as was the chief's assistant-the incessant scribbling going on, dominating the room. "And, might I add, that the cell phone that has been in contact with Jounouchi Katashi was registered to a secretary in your office, Nakajima."

Matsushita gave a happy little hum and Nakajima glared hotly at her. The expression said "bitch" even though he was too much of a gentleman to use the word.

"You see, this is the reason why I suggested we have this little meeting," Seto drawled. "I want this situation ended as soon as possible."

Okay, rich boy here used his corporate investigators to do police work. That doesn't make this so cut and dried, though, the old man thought. He made a "humph" to himself. The chief had a policy, when it came to dealing with big businesses and corporations, to never let them define a situation. He always made sure that he came up with his ideas independently.

"So, what you're saying is that this was an inside job and you knew nothing about it?" one of the policemen asked from the corner. The

Chief gave him a "back off now" frown and, immediately, the man retreated to his silent vigil.

"Well, yes... and no." Seto crossed his arms against his chest and sunk back into the chair a bit. The chair reeked of dust and he wrinkled his nose at it. Maybe, he'd have this suit burned later instead of giving it to charity.

"What do you mean?" The chief asked.

"What do I mean? Well..." He thought about it. What would be the best way to say it? "Of course, I'll have all of these private investigation reports sent to your assistant's e-mail for you to confirm, however..." His eyes drifted to the assistant and she grinned openly. He looked back at the chief. "It's very clear that something just doesn't fit."

Nakajima, from his seat, stared incredulously at his boss. What more could he do to him?

"The problems..." Seto drawled. "Well, first, the box. From what I've been told, it smells vaguely like cigarette smoke. And, as everyone knows, Nakajima can't stand it. He won't even be in the vicinity of someone who lights up."

In spite of himself, Nakajima found himself nodding. That part was, indeed, true.

"The second... He didn't have the opportunity. We have tracers on all of our corporate cell phones. And Nakajima's was in use... on an errand I assigned him... ten minutes before a call was initiated to the victim's father." Seto laced his fingers and leaned on the conference table. "And, might I add, the cell phone that made the call was a phone reported stolen a day after Jounouchi Katsuya was shot at the tournament." Now, for the fun part. "Add to the fact that we have the KC GPS Locator. We know the physical location of everyone who has a Kaiba Corp cell phone... for work purposes, you understand." He liked slipping in that little part.

The police officer frowned slightly. "Are you saying that Nakajima-san had help?"

Seto actually chuckled. How dense could these people be? "I'm saying someone had help... but it wasn't Nakajima."

"Eh?" the police chief's assistant said.

"Nakajima had nothing to do with this... never did," he clarified.

And, with that, the ex-military man released a sigh of relief. Kaiba-sama had saved him after all. He had not thrown him to the wolves out of convenience. Though, it almost didn't seem possible or likely knowing Kaiba-sama's temper and reputation.

"Then, I don't understand." The chief frowned in his typical, crabby way.

Seto raised an eyebrow at that. Yes, the police could use more help. He was going to have to supply it or the morons would be at him all day-no work getting done. "The map that was discovered on Tanaka had a fingerprint... true?"

The elderly police chief nodded.

"A... tan colored one?"

The man pruned his lips for a second. Kaiba's information on the yet-to-be-officially-filed report was good-very good. "Yes... We're tracing it now."

Seto's eyes turned to his right. "Maybe, it's... makeup?" His eyes met with Matsushita Fumi's and she blanched.

"Your shade...?"

She shook her head. "It can't be me." She glanced nervously around the table. "You can check my phone... see where I was... who I

called." She tried putting on a cute pout but her eyes were shining with anger. "It's impossible to think..."

"The block print handwriting on the map will match, Hamasaki, I'm sure..." He pointed to one of the men in black who was assigned to help with Matsushita's more "unpleasant" assignments.

Seto gave Hamasaki a stare which clearly said, "You will suffer for your part in this." The other men in the black followed suit-supporting their boss, Kaiba-sama.

He narrowed his eyes at Matsushita's again and, this time, he was intrigued to see that she was not cowering. "You're a smoker, had access to people who could get the plans to my mansion, and you bullied Hamasaki into doing... odd little tasks for you... such as planting the white box where Tanaka could find it."

She looked to the room for sympathy. "I didn't order Tanaka to shoot Jounouchi-kun in the first place. And I didn't help with anything else for that matter." She bit her bottom lip, hesitating for a second before going on. "And it's appalling that you would, now, force me to mention that I've done a hundred and one dirty jobs for Kaiba Corp... illegal both in Japan and internationally... because of sex tapes blackmail."

The chief bit the inside of his cheek. *Okay... now, we're in for it. A lover's quarrel... where all the dirty laundry will be aired.* He was half interested but, at the thought of the press camping outside of their building, groaned inwardly. He was too old for this.

Seto shook his head. "To begin with, Tanaka Yuuta... a total fanatic admittedly so on his own web site... only got into the tournament because someone found a back door into the Kaiba Corp computers... or, as Mokuba put it 'We've been hacked... How did he manage that without every bell and whistle around here going off?'" Seto regarded her with a thinly disguised, dangerous expression. "Someone on the inside." His head turned to Hamasaki. "Someone who had connections to security and wouldn't be questioned."

He glanced to the chief. "I'll expect a full investigation of her and her actions. But, I'm certain... you'll find..." And Seto met with her eyes again, staring deeply into them,... You've never done a single illegal action for Kaiba Corp... both here or internationally." With a disinterested shrug he said, "You're as clean as they come."

Now, even the men in black stared incredulously. Matsushita's rep in the yakuza underworld-as a "little sister"-had always preceded her.

"But! But... !" she flustered. "But, still... those sex tapes!" Yes, she'd go down in flames but she'd take Kaiba-sama with her, ruin his reputation if she could do nothing else.

Now, he smiled at her with a hard grin, the kind he used to reserve for his adopted father back in the day. "Once they analyze the makeup print and trace that exquisite, but custom, dagger back to the silversmith who made it... you and your lackey will be in jail for a very very long time." Then, he folded his arms against his chest and said smugly, "And, by the way, there aren't any sex tapes because I'm not interested in you... never have been. And the police investigation will discover that, too." He tilted his head almost sweetly to one side. "Secretaries can be such awful gossips."

Yes, the secretaries... His own was the worst when it came to the people he rejected. He chuckled inwardly at that.

"What?" She fumed. "You don't know anything!"

Oh, really? Blue eyes hardened. " *What I know* is that all of this was an attempt to oust Nakajima from his job so that you would get it and have a better chance to be with me..." He practically purred, "and make me love you." It was fun for Seto to call something what it was. "And, while you are a beautiful woman, and I can certainly appreciate that... you're not the one for me."

You're not the person who should be by my side.

*I want more than a corporate life filled with hollow people. A half-life.
I see that now.*

Someone taught me this.

Someone I have learned to care for... deeply.

Oh, that one hurt. Her blood boiled. What right did he have to say that with everyone listening in-especially the police? Did he think she was just going to sit there like a good little girl and take it? She could hit back, too. "Really? Don't tell me you're gay," she seethed and the Police Chief placed a withered hand over his eyes. He didn't need this.

A chestnut eyebrow arched curiously. "First, non-existent blackmail with sex tapes and, now, suddenly, I'm gay?" He leaned in with a smirk. "I think you're losing your grip... Matsushita." He turned to the chief. "And, I believe, that will be my official statement to the police. Just like Tanaka, Matsushita is both guilty... and obsessed with me." He crossed his legs casually under the table again. "And I think she needs a full mental evaluation."

"Why... *YOU* !" In fury, she was about to throw herself at Seto only to have the police officer behind her snatch her before landing even a single blow.

She struggled anyway, the police officer removing her from her chair. But it didn't matter. She was still pissed and everyone would know about it. "You'll pay for this, Kaiba-sama! I know people! I do! You won't find a moment's peace until we're done with you!"

"My goodness, was that a threat?" he joked dryly under his breath.

"Get her out of here and into the next interrogation room!" the chief ordered as the woman continued to struggle against the police officer.

Seto gave a nod to one of the men in black to pack up the laptop on the desk. His business, here, was done.

The door was flung open.

But one last thing.

"Oh, and you can be sure that I'll be laughing at you... my dear... while you're behind bars. I'm sure prison jumpers will go well with that tacky nail polish."

She shook her head violently. "ASSHOLE!" High heels dragged and left behind double tracks down the hallway.

Kaiba Seto stood from his chair and gave a half-hearted, if not conceited, wave in her direction. It was the least he could do.

"Boring..."

Time seemed to pass slowly in this place. He eyed his phone again and then sighed impatiently.

"I guess... I could click around," he muttered to himself as he picked up the remote. Things had certainly slowed to a standstill once Seto had left his room. Not that Jou liked the kind of "hovering but not hovering" nature Seto exhibited in the emergency room or the way he seemed to be ordering people around purely for the sake of it. But, once he was examined, treated, and got his room for "observation," he thought they'd have some time alone. Time where they could talk about what happened.

Yes, the blond felt a little disappointed. Then again, that feeling was second nature by now so he really shouldn't have been all that surprised.

Jounouchi, lying in his hospital bed, clicked to the next channel only to see Kaiba Seto's press conference start. He blinked at it, slightly

surprised.

"So, that's why he left in such a hurry," Jou mumbled to himself. "I wonder what's going on." He picked up his phone and scrolled through the messages again, reviewing the latest one:

ON CHANNEL 7 IN 15 MINUTES

BELIEVE IN ME

WE WILL DISCUSS LATER

"I can believe in you, Kaiba," Jounouchi said with a curious smile coming to him. "But, whatever it is, it's got to be more than Tanaka's capture."

The television camera moved in for a close-up.

Now sporting his typical white trench with black trousers and long sleeved shirt to match, Seto Kaiba stood behind a lectern with the KC Logo proudly on it and an electronic background set to a serene sunset image of the Kaiba Corp building.

Chestnut hair falling into his eyes, Seto smirked at the TV camera and then turned his head, noting the vast number of reporters who had clamored their way in. A thousand pops of light surrounded him as he began to speak.

"I know that you are all eager for an official statement regarding the shooting at my tournament as well as the home invasion that took place a few hours ago at my personal residence in Domino."

"Residence?" Jounouchi scoffed as he settled down into the blankets. "His place is a frickin' 'mansion,' and nothing like the little cracker box that I live in."

On TV, a thousand voices spoke at once-all calling out questions; all demanding answers.

Seto made a palm gesture for them to quiet down. He had no intention of repeating himself. "Now, I have spoken with my team of lawyers and, while, we are cooperating with the police in every respect, I did want to clear a few things up."

More flashes; more voices. The reporters jostled for position and Kaiba Seto loved it. Jou shook his head in dismay. "I'm sure he lives for this kind of stuff. But I'd hate it if I had this kind of attention." He folded his arms against his chest.

"As for the rumors of sex tapes, there are none..."

Jou bolted up in bed and then grabbed his bandages. "Damn, that hurt!" Then, breathing hard, he turned his head up at the TV. "W-What sex tapes? I didn't hear anything about any sex tapes? Was Tanaka a pervert or what?"

"As for the rumors regarding a relationship between me and any employee at Kaiba Corp..."

Jounouchi's eyes widened. "What the Hell?"

"I've never been so unprofessional as to allow an office romance." He gave a cheeky grin to the cameras. "I never mix business and pleasure. It would be unbecoming."

A faint voice chimed in, "Can we interview your employees about that?"

A casual shrug. "Can anyone stop *you* from asking questions?"

A chorus of laughs filled the room.

A hand raised off to the right and a reporter shouted, "Any truth to the rumor that Tanaka was going to kill you in your own home?"

Seto said smoothly, "I can't answer that one directly because of the on-going police investigation. However... If you've seen his web site,

I think it speaks for itself. He was... and is... a self-described 'fanatic' for Kaiba Seto-sama."

Another hand shot up.

Seto pointed.

"Any truth to the rumor that Jounouchi Katsuya has been hiding out at your mansion?"

"Hiding?" Jou fumed. It pissed him off and there was a not so subtle hint in the tone that rubbed Jou the wrong way, too. For a moment, he felt like flinging the remote.

For the first time, the chestnut haired young man actually smiled. "I think that I have the best security people in Domino." Then, he glanced at the screen, his features turning almost impish. "Why bother the police... when I have exactly what I need at home?"

Then, he nodded to himself. "... Exactly what I need..."

The following morning, the Domino Star ran an exclusive, paid interview from Jounouchi Katashi entitled TANGLED INTO A FANATIC'S WEB where he explained that he had been targeted and manipulated from the very beginning. He was a sad victim of unforeseen circumstances stemming from Kaiba Corp itself. The issue featured a large color photo of Kaiba Seto taken at the press conference, and it ran out, in less than four hours, thanks to a gaggle of high school fan girls.

"G'night, Nii-sama," Mokuba said distractedly, coming up behind the leather couch with this hand held game chiming as the machine powered down.

"Until tomorrow," Seto agreed, resting his left elbow against the arm of the couch and turning slightly to see him.

The raven haired child glanced down for a second and asked, "Do you need help with him?" He was referring to Jounouchi who was fast asleep, his head in Seto's lap and feet stretched out lengthwise along the couch. There was a dark green throw draped over him.

Seto shook his head. "Not necessary... the movie's not over yet."

"Well, uh..." Mokuba scratched the back of his head. "Gee, I didn't think you were into those old black and white samurai movies and stuff."

The truth was, Mokuba was absolutely right. For the most part, he thought that black and white films were grainy and uninteresting with bad acting in every scene. Not to mention, he'd had enough of studying samurais back in school and during those horrid "tutoring sessions" that Gozamburo had put him through.

He looked down at the sleeping face. "But, Jounouchi likes them and I thought I would give the genre a second chance." He tilted his head thoughtfully. "And this 1950's film seems to be based, loosely, on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* . So, it wasn't that intolerable."

"Hmmm... 'It wasn't that intolerable'," Mokuba joked as he made his way for his room. "Now, there's a review worth reading."

"Well, it's the truth," Seto said to himself as he went back to lightly toying with Jounouchi's blond hair. He'd pick up the strands and let them fall, bit by bit, onto Jou's nose or cheeks. Jou's hair was soft with a silky texture that made toying with it almost a delicious habit-not like his own hair at all, somewhat thicker and stiffer in texture.

As the movie credits started to roll, Seto's mind flicked back to the hospital. He'd returned to Jounouchi, with some reluctance, to see what he thought of the news conference. Most certainly, the blond would bombard him with questions. Jou was like that. And he'd have to start the whole discussion at square one-again-as though he hadn't been questioned enough for one day. But, instead, he found the blond sitting up in bed with a somber look on his face.

Strange.

"Did you see me on television?" Seto asked forcing a slightly boyish smirk.

"Uh... yeah, I did..." His expression seemed distracted. Or, was it something else?

He's probably troubled, Seto reasoned. He doesn't know that's going on .

Jounouchi shrugged awkwardly. "Tanaka breaking in... Now, there's sex tapes and some stuff about you having an affair with a Kaiba Corp employee..." Then, he shook his head at it all. "You don't go looking for trouble, Kaiba. Trouble finds you, huh?"

"It's the way of life."

Jou looked at him with an unreadable expression. "Life..."

The young CEO took the chair next to Jou's bed and eyed him carefully. "Something?" He cocked his brow. "Well...?"

The blond nodded to the door. "They just told me that I can go home tomorrow."

"Good." Seto pulled out his cell phone and began pressing numbers. "Did they mention what time we need the driver to pick you up? It's unfortunate but... I'll have to be at work answering the police's questions and issuing more press releases." What a headache tomorrow would be... Domino police crawling all over Kaiba Corp, his own PR people hounding him for details, details, details... What would be the best spin to put on the situation? Employees gawking at him all day. The press. Flash photography.

Jounouchi said nothing. He wrapped his arms around his bandages, head down.

"I've relied on you too much, Kaiba."

"Eh?" He looked up from his phone.

Jounouchi turned to him sadly. "I've leaned on you too much..." It was the truth. He could say it. "All you've done is *give* ; all I've done is *take*..."

Seto sat in the chair, stunned that Jou would say such a thing. Hadn't he been almost killed at the tournament? And, again, when Tanaka invaded the mansion? What of Mokuba? He would have certainly suffered at Tanaka's hands had Jou not been there to rescue him.

Something felt profoundly unfair.

"They've patched me up pretty good," Jou went on, voice quivering slightly. "And, thanks to my nurse... His room's down the hall, by the way. His stab wounds weren't so bad after all..." Jou flipped his blond hair out of his eyes nervously. "But, I've got the routine down pretty well by now. I can... I can take care of myself."

The young CEO stood from his chair, fingers curling into a fist. "Is that what you really want?" There was a dark aura to Seto now.

Jounouchi lowered his head again. "I... uh..."

He cocked his head to the side, seeing a small slice of Jou's profile-eyes glistening, face flushed. "Jounouchi, do you really want to go back to that... *that place*... all alone?" He leaned in closer. "How much food is in that house? Bandages? What if you get sick in the night? Who will care for you?"

He touched Jou's shoulder, forcing him to face him. "Jou?"

The blond's head was down but a thin tear slid away from his eye, curving on the apple of his cheek.

Seto asked again, "Do you really want to leave me that badly?"

A sharp intake of breath. "Wha-? No!" And Jou turned his head up to meet Kaiba Seto-their faces close. Very close.

"Well...?"

Jounouchi opened his mouth but couldn't think of a response. A heavy tear on his lash made him blink again-streaking down. Seto smudged it away with his thumb. "I want to hear the truth this time... from the guy who is best friends with the Geek Squad not to mention that idiot who gives 'friendship speeches.' The *truth* !"

Jou made a sound, half laughing and half sobbing. He gave a shaky nod as he rubbed his palm against his wet face. "If it's okay... I..." Honey colored eyes met blue. "I want to stay... with you."

The same words... For a moment, Seto recalled an image of Jounouchi-the first time he'd opened his eyes in the hospital. He'd uttered the same words then "I want to stay with you in this life" followed by...

"Thank you, Kaiba..."

Yes... The same words, the same meaning...

The same feelings.

Kaiba Seto grabbed Jounouchi Katsuya by the shoulders and slowly pulled him into a warm embrace. "Then, come home... and stop being so stubborn." He pressed a smile into the blond's neck and whispered, "That's my job."

A soft laugh in his ear and he relented-arms hugged back

The credits were now over and the television screen had gone blank. Seto was still on the couch toying with Jou's hair. What the blond wanted now, what he told him before falling asleep, was that he wanted to take things slowly between them. Seto had been curious about that. Hadn't they been slow thus far? But, as he reflected upon

it, he realized that his few "encounters," and he liked the idea of referring to all of his past- *people* -like that, were like shooting stars- immediate, passionate, and blissfully over. Seto liked ending things before anyone could form an attachment. True, he never chose anyone at his workplace. But that didn't mean that he couldn't have *personal guests* he met at parties or business meetings... getting together with him for drinks or dinner late into the night.

He toyed with Jounouchi's hair, his mind drifting to the not so distant past. Yes, he'd have a different pair of shoes under his bed or pantyhose draped over the shower. And while he enjoyed the thrill and newness of it all, he really didn't see himself with anyone for longer than a night or two... maybe a month. Yes, his record was a month.

Jounouchi's hair really did shine brightly, even when it fell to his cheeks that were slowly purpling with the marks Tanaka'd left on him. Seto frowned, fingers brushing lightly against bruises now, as though a touch could make them disappear. He would make Tanaka pay for that. He would suffer in prison for the rest of his days and so would that bitchy Matsushita and her fake, press-on nails.

And, in spite of all that they tried, we will be together... and we will take it slowly.

"Nah," Jounouchi had told him, "you can't mean that..." He turned his attention to some spot in the room, his vision far, far away. "A man's got... *needs*... ya know? I'm one of them. I totally get this..." Jou seemed uncomfortable talking about *it* even if he did 'get' the concept. "I can't see a good lookin' guy like you waiting around patiently for... I dunno when. And that's one reason why... I kind of thought... maybe going back to my place would be better."

Seto remembered sliding his arm from the back of the couch to around Jou's shoulders. "So, that was it... hm?"

Jounouchi sighed, an embarrassed blush coming. "Possibly."

Blue eyes regarded him. "Try ' *probably*' and you've got something closer to the mark, I think."

Without hesitation, the blond rested his head against Seto's shoulder. "The other that I said back in the hospital was true, though."

Seto gave a nod. He didn't doubt it. Jou had his pride and he had been relying on others more than he was comfortable with.

"Plus, I'm not good with figuring out emotions or what to do... or how to do things... My parents are divorced and, honestly, I don't even know what a happy couple looks like." He leaned his head in a bit. "I just don't know about anything anymore... other than..." He glanced up at Seto for a second. "This is where I want to be."

Seto embraced him again. "Then, let's solve this puzzle... together." Jou opened his mouth to counter but Seto interrupted with "... as long as it takes... no pressure."

It wasn't long after that that Jounouchi had drifted off to sleep-first, head on shoulder and, then, feet curled up on the couch. And, eventually, Jou's head ended up in Seto's lap. The weight of his body was pleasant and the warm scent of his skin was good. But the hair-playing with Jou's hair-was the part which surprised him. And that felt good, too.

Seto Kaiba smiled to himself. There would be a lot of things to look forward to-a lot of firsts. The kiss-Yes, a real kiss. And dates-probably pizza or something with a movie. Ice cream, Jounouchi loved that stuff. Maybe, he could talk him into some coffee ice cream. And, along more romantic lines-Seto smirked a bit at that one, too. But, no rushing. No pressure. If he had to wait for months or even years, he felt that he could do it-each day being a new discovery and each day being an achievement would be enough because Jou had a way of touching something deep inside himself that was just waking up. A little scary, maybe? Yes, but he'd call it "awkward" for now. But, there was also a sense of comfort there, too.

Something he'd never give up now that he'd had a taste of it.

Never.

And, with that, Seto took the remote from Jou's hand and clicked the television off.

"Good night."

Chapter 13

HITO HATA EXTRA...

"Jou?"

"Y-Yeah?"

Honey colored eyes were searching, looking for reassurance that everything would be okay.

"Are you ready to do this?"

A nod.

"Then, get out of the way," Seto ordered in an undertone which gave no room for debate.

The blond-mopped young man tripped awkwardly over his own feet as he tried to get out of Kaiba Seto's path. This situation was bad enough without adding a certain CEO's ire to the mix.

Plus, his companion looked driven.

Not... good...

With little effort, Seto picked up the oversized printer/scanner off the table and turned to Jounouchi, chestnut hair falling into his eyes enough to add shadow. "Do as I say. Stand back."

It was as simple as that and Jounouchi knew it.

In the next second, the useless machine was thrown to the ground with the case broken and wires tumbling out.

"Feel better now?" Jou asked sarcastically, a hand on his hip. He could have just handed the thing over. It was probably worth money. Good money, too!

"It was sabotaged. What more can I say?" A shrug. "All of its internal software had been deleted and the flashing error messages were annoying."

"Oh, well... yeah... I can see your point about that but..." The blond turned his attention from the junk pile on the floor and noticed that Seto was now standing on the table and his hands were pushing up the black suspended ceiling tiles. A soft growl of frustration. "There's no way I can get us out from this route." He jumped down, feet thudding on carpet.

Jou was back at the CEO's designer desk, scanning it again as he had when they first realized the predicament they'd gotten themselves into. "Okay, so we know the phone's gone and the computer's no good, too." Jounouchi held up the end of the computer's plug, cut off with wire cutters. "Your laptop battery's dead... Oi! What about your business cell phone?"

Seto shook his head warily, reached into his inside coat pocket, and pulled out the phone with a feeling of dread. He opened it, cringed slightly, and flashed it at Jounouchi. "Dead. He must have switched the batteries when I wasn't looking."

"But are we sure it was Mokuba?" It was a stupid question, Jou knew, but he wanted to be the peacemaker if he could.

"Who else could it be?"

The blond tried the doorknob again-gripping, twisting, turning. "Then, what I don't understand is why Mokuba would put Looney Glue into the lock and trap us in here." He gestured to the massive windows behind Seto's desk. "It's Sunday! We're only here to pick up your wallet. And, besides, it's pouring out and he knows it."

Thunder rolled on cue just to emphasize his point.

"Why do you think Mokuba returned my wallet *here* in the first place instead of handing it directly to me?" Seto sighed inwardly, knowing very well *why* his younger brother would do this to him. "Romantic," he growled under his breath remembering the little valentine tucked into the wallet which said "ENJOY YOUR ALONE-TIME!" Though, it would be best to keep that little tidbit of information away from Jou for the moment.

"Hm?" Jou hummed, not getting it. It wasn't like him to mutter. Kaibas always liked to be the center of attention and be well understood.

"Little brothers," he shrugged back. "They all must go through these phases, I suppose."

The "prank" explanation made sense even though he had inklings otherwise. The blond grinned back. "Yeah... Thanks to living with you, I kinda know what it's like to have one." Then, he turned up with one of the most beautiful smiles that Seto had ever seen. His mind drifted away a little bit until he heard, "One of these days, we'll look back on this moment and laugh."

Seto cocked his head to one side in thought. He scratched his chin. "Either that or... take revenge."

Ah, that sounded good, too.

Now, the blond was smiling wickedly. "Got any ideas?"

"Without a doubt."

"Nii-sama!"

Mokuba came storming into Seto's home office without bothering to knock. Instead of working, Seto was sitting with Jounouchi-an arm draped the length of the back of the tan couch-and watching TV.

They were perched side by side with a bowl of popcorn that Jou had brought in with him.

It was a nice little break.

"Nii-sama! Nii-sama!" the raven haired Kaiba shouted in frustration with a finger pointed the way he'd come. "There's a problem! A *big one* ."

"Really?" Kaiba Seto raised a delicate eyebrow and Jou crammed in a hand-full of popcorn into his mouth to hide a grin. "And just what would that be?"

Arms folded against his chest now and breathing hard, he gritted the words, "My bathroom is... *missing* ."

"Bathroom?" Seto drawled.

"Yes! The private one attached to my bedroom!" He wanted to tear his hair out, this was so impossible.

"You've misplaced your... *bathroom* ?" The older brother smiled thinly at the thought. "I remember that you've lost your school jacket a couple of times, but..."

" *No! No! No!* " Mokuba was livid now, gesturing wildly. "It was there before I went to school. Now, the door's gone and everything's freshly wallpapered!"

"Doors can be such a problem," Seto explained with his trademark smirk. "Why, just the other day, Jou and I had a... quite *difficult* time... leaving my office."

"It was a good thing that I used to be in a gang," Jounouchi chimed in. "Breaking and entering... Well, I guess, that would be... *leaving*... in this case, is not all that hard once I put some thought to it..."

Seto smirked at Jou. "Yes, taking the door off the hinges kept me from having to buy another door."

The blond picked up a piece of popcorn, tossed it into the air, and munched. "Now, I really love that Swiss Army Knife that you got me!" He shoved Seto playfully with his shoulder as a "thanks."

Blue eyes looked into the bowl. "This is really good popcorn, Jou."

"Thanks! The secret is putting the pizza cheese on top and then giving a good toss and..."

"Ummm....HELLO! My bathroom is... *missing* !" Mokuba yelled, demanding to be the center of attention once again. "Do something, people!"

Seto reached in with delicate fingers for another piece of popcorn. "I think your lost door is like the flu. Give it seven to ten days and all should return to normal."

The little brother's chin dropped. "W-H-A-T? Ten days!"

Seto popped the yummy piece into his mouth and Jou chuckled beside him.

CRUNCH.

"Well, what am I supposed to do if I need to use the bathroom in the middle of the night?" This was so unfair of his Nii-sama!

"Hold it?" Seto suggested dryly.

"Tie a knot in it?" Jou chimed in.

"Ehhh?" He glared at the cheeky blond.

"Try using the hall toilet," Seto said distractedly, taking the bowl of popcorn and giving a shake so the fluffy pieces rose to the surface. "Now, unless you'd like to join us...?" He offered the bowl.

Mokuba glared daggers. "You and I both know the only reason why I did all of that stuff to you and Jou was because... !" He was starting

to blush with each word. Hadn't he been kind, after all? Thoughtful? So much work went into that.

"Because?" Jou blinked innocently. This was so much fun.

"Because?" Seto asked, eating another bite and letting the soft crunch fill the room as an afterthought.

"OOOHHHH... forget it!" He threw his hands up into the air melodramatically and stomped out of the room.

Jou leaned against Seto a little and reached in for a handful from the bowl. "I don't think the two of us need any help getting together. I'm fine like we are now."

More than best friends, a little less than lovers-a gentle companionship that made them both feel warm. It was perfect for now. Just what they needed.

Seto tilted his head down with a light blush coming. "If you are content, so am I."

With a slightly devious chuckle, Jounouchi took the bowl from Seto, sat in his lap, and offered a bite. "If *we are*..." the blond whispered into his ear, "then, that's all that matters. Now, open up."

He opened his mouth and was fed a single, fluffy piece of popcorn.

A crunch.

"Agreed."

-The End-